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OR,

The Rocky Racket at Rough Robin.

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AUTHOR OF "LAUGHING LEO," "OLD '49,"
"NOR' WEST NICK," "DAN BROWN OF
DENVER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A PILGRIM AND A STRANGER.

"'ELLO, Dutchy! what bloomin' breeze dropped you down hin this 'ere un'healthy climit fer foreigners, hey?"

It was a peculiar voice, and came from a peculiar looking individual, who suddenly hopped from a shady mass of rusty-looking bushes and perched with bird-like agility on top of a rough boulder. A voice that suggested an impudent, trampish bird, shrill yet husky, piping, yet from a pair of sound lungs. A voice such as one might expect from a disreputable English sparrow transformed into a still more disreputable human being. A voice that matched well the bird-like action, the bird-like cocking of his head, the peering, inquisitive eyes, the sharp, pointed nose, the rusty, ragged hair that might well pass for

ENGLISH SPARROW GAVE A HOWL OF ANGRY PAIN AS HE LEAPED INTO THE AIR.

feathers; and the soiled, dingy, patched and ragged garments of a grayish brown, might have been the coat of a sparrow after living years amid the coal-smoke and grime and storms about some busy freight yard.

"Who vhas Dutchy yourselluf?" sharply exploded the dusty, travel-worn pilgrim, abruptly halting before that unexpected apparition, and instinctively clubbing the stout staff with which he had been aiding his heavy footsteps along the rocky trail. "Vhas you a peobles, or vhas you some imbp foon darkness dot vphants" some droobles to make mit a veller? Sphits dot out kvick, or I shoots you mit dis glub—so!"

A revolver gleamed in one claw-like hand, and the little eyes sparkled maliciously over the polished tube as it covered the pilgrim.

"H'I'm a bit hof a shooter myself, Dutchy, ye want to find out, hif you come that sort hof bluff! Down on yer marrows, my covey, an' ax my pardon for daring to ruffle hup hat the cock-o'-the-walk!"

"Den you din'd vhas pin der duyfel? You vhas shoost a gock-rooster oudt valkin' for foon? Vhell, vhell! vhas dere any more like dot off der vhamily where you coom from? Or vhas der battern all smashed oop when you hatched oudt? Vhell, vhell! a two-leggedt gock-rooster! Dot vhas a cooriosidy vhell vordt dramping all der vhay from Spitzenberg shoost to look at vonce!"

There was an echo half of admiration, half of awe in the tones of the pilgrim as he reversed the staff and leaned upon it, gazing at the other without seeming to notice the deadly weapon he held.

Truly, two oddities had met on the trail that sultry day.

The traveler was tall, gaunt and bony, with a forward stoop of his head and shoulders, but whether old or young, could hardly be told with certainty by a passing glance. But there was one thing about him that could hardly be overlooked: his nationality.

The flat cap with its great visor; the long coat of primitive cut, with its many brass buttons; the flapped vest; the trousers, almost as long in body as in legs; the woolen socks and the huge, uncouth sabots whose wooden clattering over the flinty trail had roused English Sparrow from his little siesta; one and all distinctly indicated a wandering son of Vaterland.

From beneath the flat cap hung straight locks of hair, almost lint-like in their peculiar color. Eyes of light-gray, small in size and presumably stolid in expression on all ordinary occasions, now filled with curiosity as they rested on the sparrow-like desperado who still kept the way-farer covered with his pistol.

His features were in perfect keeping with his gaunt and bony figure. His brow knotty and full of bumps. His nose long and thin, with nostrils that seemed to quiver as he scanned English Sparrow. His cheekbones high and prominent. His jaws broad and square, though his chin seemed unusually long and pointed.

It was a strong face, if not a handsome, yet there was a peculiar simplicity about it; in the gray eyes, and about the wide, thin-lipped mouth especially; that made English Sparrow set him down as a subject fit for his malicious wit.

"Too green for to burn hin the middle hof a volcano!" he mentally decided; and English Sparrow had the reputation of being an unusually accurate reader of his fellow-beings. "E hain't 'eeled; not heven a bit hof ha whittle. What's the likes hof 'im doing 'ere, hif hit hain't to make sport for 'is betters?"

With a bird-like hop, he left the rock, at the same time putting away his pistol, balancing from one foot to the other as he stood in the trail before the German, still with that characteristic cocking of his head on one shoulder as his sparkling eyes snapped maliciously.

"You're ha stranger hend ha pilgrim, Dutchy, so—"

"How you know I vhas Dutchy?" with just the suspicion of anger in those placid orbs. "Mein Gott! how comes it so? Vhat makes so many pig vools come by my vhay? Id vhas Dutch—Dutchy—Saurkraut—Limburger—undil dot makes me too dired vor vhaliking! Id vhas foony—maype! Bud I didn't vhas seen it dot vhay yit!"

Even English Sparrow was taken a little aback by this outburst, despite his natural and cultivated impudence. Surely such a positive section of the Vaterland would not deny his country?

"I called you Dutchy—"

"Und vhat makes dot so?" curtly interposed the pilgrim. "Vhy not Vrenchy, or Irishy, or someding else like dot? Vhat for Dutchy all der dime? A leedle shange like dot gifs somebody a leedle resd, vonce in a long vwhile—ain'd it?"

"Then you hain't Dutchy?" innocently chirped the Sparrow, something like thankfulness coming into his face as he grasped a bony hand between his palms, shaking it vigorously as he added rapidly. "Hit makes me bubble hover with joy, my dear feller! Hif you hain't a Dutchman, then that lets me hout! H'I won't 'ave to plant you—see?"

"I see—bud I makes me nodding oudt!" mur-

mured the pilgrim, with a sorely perplexed air as he gazed steadily, almost wistfully into the face of this enigma before him.

English Sparrow laughed lightly as he responded:

"You're going hon to Rough Robin, hof course?"

"I vhas looking vor vork, und—und—" with a swift, covert glance around like one who more than half anticipates an unwelcome vision. "Dot Rough Ropin blace; dey vhasn'd blenty vhimmen py dot?"

"Not 'alf henough to go 'round," laughed English Sparrow, but with a puzzled light deepening in his keen eyes. "But you won't 'ave to 'unt long bafore finding ha mate, H'I don't think, Dutchy, for—"

"Look you py me, leedle v heller!" frowned the pilgrim, his tones suddenly growing hard and even stern as his gray eyes fixed the other with a steady stare. "Peesness is peesness, und voolishness is volly. Shoking vhas all rigth when you makes it py some oder v heller, bud—"

"Beg pardon, dear feller," laughed English Sparrow. "Hof course you're not Dutch; hany-one can see that hat ha second glance, hif 'e don't look too low. But those gunboats hon your 'oofs, now!"

The pilgrim gravely lifted one foot to gaze at the massive shoes of wood, held snugly to his feet by the upper of leather.

"Vhas it dot makes a vool oudt uff you?" he mildly asked. "Dem schoon?"

"Hif hit was honly me, hit wouldn't matter so much," with a grave shake of his head. "But the boys hin Rough Robin hare so mighty particular, ye know! They cawn't abide hanythink has heven looks has hif hit was Dutch, ye know! Hand hif you was to go there—hif they was to see them gunboats—well, let's 'ope they'll be hin good 'umor. Let's 'ope they'll let you hof heasier than they do Dutchmen has ha rule!"

The pilgrim stared at the little rascal with open eyes and open mouth during this dubious speech. Then, with a grunt brought forth by his abrupt descent, he dropped to the ground and hurriedly removed the telltale shoes, putting them into his pack and substituting for them a pair of stout brogans.

"Und all der dimes id vhas dem schoon!" he puffed, as he regained his perpendicular once more. "I dinks dey mustd somedinks pe wrong, vor else vy all dem v hellers keeb galling me Dutchy?"

"The shoes, hof course," grinned English Sparrow. "For you hain't ha bit Dutch with them hof your 'oofs."

"Vhy vor I shouldt be? Vhas Spitzenberg Dutch?"

"You're ha pilgrim from Spitzenberg, then?"

"Vrom der landt uff der vhalrus und der bolar pear—yaw! Vhen a v heller galls me Dutch—vhell, I say noddinks! I shoost knock him py der headt oafar his heels! I vhas un oldt soldier—me! I fight mit Sigel—yaw!"

"And Sigel wouldn't 'ave a Dutchman hanywhere within gunshot hof his 'eadquarters, ye know," grinned English Sparrow, slowly moving forward as the pilgrim picked up his pack once more. "Hall the same, H'I'm hawfully glad you're not a Dutchman. 'Cause why: H'I'm the sexton hof Rough Robin, hand hit's my duty to bury hevery Dutchman free hof charge bafter the boys 'ave their fun with 'im, don't ye see?"

"Dem poys don't like some Dutch, eh?"

"Like 'em to death!" grinned English Sparrow. "Like 'em so much that they give 'em beech hand hevery one ha free 'ome hand lodging: ha 'igh lot hon the 'illside, ye know!"

"Vhell," hesitated the pilgrim, looking as though he hardly comprehended this expression. "I didn't vhas rich; I don't vhas got mooch gelt; bud I vasn't asking so mooch shenerosity like dot. I bay my vhay vhere I go. I ask nodding vor nodding. I vhas quied like a sheeb so long as beebles don't shumb on me mit both feed. Uff dey does dot—look vhay oudt, somebody! Dot makes var und plood und droubles all der blace oafar—for sure!"

There was an almost pompous gravity in face and voice as he uttered these words, and English Sparrow turned his face aside to hide a chuckle. The pilgrim produced a quaint porcelain pipe, gayly painted, with a long stem, filling and lighting it as they strode toward the now visible town of Rough Robin. If anything was wanting to complete the picture of an ideal German, this pipe proved the missing link.

Short as the distance was, English Sparrow improved his time to good advantage, learning that his new-found companion was called Daniel Goodykoontz; that he was seeking his fortune in the mining country; that he was not entirely "broke," though he preferred to walk for economy's sake.

"They do charge like blazes on them bloody stages," nodded the Sparrow. "Hand the ducats you save thus can be spent buying hof the boys hif they take ha notion you're Dutch, ye know! Not that H'I'll let 'em 'urt ye, my covey! You're hunder my wing, now, hand though there's ha hawfully tough gang hin Rough Robin, they won't dare look crossheyed hat ha chum hof mine, ye know."

"Id ain't der mans dot I vhas avraidt uff, so

mooch as der vhimmens!" muttered Goodykoontz, with another of those curiously apprehensive glances about him as English Sparrow led the way along the street, maliciously making covert signals to the men lounging in front of a saloon. "Uff dem vhimmens—vhell! who vhas broke loose now?"

A chorus of shouts and catcalls came from the loungers, only too eager to jump at a chance for sport, and the pilgrim stared from side to side in open-eyed astonishment. Then—a pistol exploded, and with a sharp ejaculation, Daniel Goodykoontz started back, throwing up his hands.

CHAPTER II.

EVEN A WORM WILL TURN.

"DON'T butcher 'im, mates, hif 'e his ha Dutchman!" cried English Sparrow, ducking his head and leaping to one side, his impish face full of malicious delight as he glanced back toward the pilgrim whom he had led into trouble and tribulation.

"Steady, Dutch!" rung out a clear, mocking voice as another shot sent the dust puffing up from directly between the rough-shod feet. "Try to jump the game before the deal is out, and we'll pin your heels fast with leaden plugs!"

"Grin hand bear hit, Dutch Dan!" chirped English Sparrow, dancing about in high glee. "Hit's honly fun, ye know! Hit's honly the jolly spirits hof the boys—honly ha bloomin' joke to pass orf the time! Grin hand bear hit, my covey! For h'I don't want to 'ave to plant you hin the garden hof stiff hon the 'illside, ye know! What ha lark!"

Where there had been but half a dozen loungers about the open door of the saloon when English Sparrow gave his signal, there was now thrice as many, with the number being steadily increased by men coming from almost every direction, their attention attracted by the pistol-shots and the loud cries. And as they realized what was in the wind, each and every being hastened to add something to the uproar.

As yet it was only horse-play, and rough though this was, the stranger was in no great peril. How long this would remain thus, depended mainly upon himself and the manner in which he stood the "joke."

At that first shot, Goodykoontz felt a sharp shock, and started back with upflung hands; but the hand and eye of a master had winged the lead, simply knocking the gaudy porcelain pipe from the teeth of its owner.

One swift glance toward the laughing face of the sharpshooter, and a mechanical movement of his own hands toward his waist, then the pilgrim seemed to realize what had happened. And with a sharp, agitated ejaculation he stooped and caught up the pipe, still smoking freely, though the curiously carved metal cover was twisted ajar.

"Mein Gott! dot bipe—dot bipe uff mein fadder!" cried Goodykoontz, as he tremblingly seized the painted bowl, turning it round and round to sum up the injury it had suffered from the bullet. "Dank heafen! id vhas not so badt as I dinks!"

The deftly-aimed bullet had struck the metal cover, denting it and loosening the hinge, but then glancing off without injuring the bowl itself, though snapping the silken cord by which it was attached to the long stem.

The pilgrim seemed partially dazed. He stared around him, over the rough, laughing faces, apparently unhearing the coarse jests and rude comments which fell so freely from bearded lips. He fitted the bowl to its stem, and began crowding tobacco into the top, guided by the sense of touch alone; indeed it all seemed purely mechanical.

"Whar'd ye find the queeriosity, Sparrow?"

"Is it flesh an' blood, or jes' stuffed?"

"When's the rest o' the show comin'?"

"Hain't 'e show henough, hall to 'imself?" laughed English Sparrow, fairly purple in the face with malicious mirth. "Armless, too, hunless you go fer to call 'im Dutchy!"

"Who vhas Dutchy, yourselluf?" mechanically uttered Goodykoontz, with a stolid, dazed stare at the little rascal. "I vhas a vhalrus mit sefen vlipppers! Dutchmans you!"

"Don't butcher 'im, mates, for then H'I'd 'ave to plant 'im free gratis for nothink!" howled English Sparrow, turning a flip-flap in the hight of his delight. "Don't make 'im dawnse the 'ighland fling! Don't make 'im pay 'is footing, hif you love me! Ho! rawts!"

A word was quite enough for such reckless spirits, and with yells of laughter the crowd fell back until one side of the space was clear. Then, amid cries of "dance, ye cripple!" pistols began to crack merrily.

Dutch Dan—to give him the title which was fated to "stick" during his stay at Rough Robin—had filled his pipe, and was lighting it, still with the dazed, mechanical air such as one utterly bewildered might wear under such trying circumstances.

A short ejaculation broke from his lips as a bullet struck the ground directly in front of his feet, and as the lead glanced up and on with a shrill whistle, he hopped in the air with ludicrous celerity.

If anything had been lacking, this supplied the want, and in swift succession the weapons exploded, sending tiny puffs of dust into the air, causing the poor devil to leap about actively, in order to save his feet from being hit. And then, with a true, sure aim, Bully Baldwin, the reckless, handsome sport who had first burned powder, sent a bullet nipping through the stiff peak of the Dutchman's cap, barely an inch from his temples.

"Look oudt, you v heller!" squealed Goodykoontz, with a trace of indignation through his terror, as he tore the cap from his head and stared at the ragged hole cut by the lead, then hurled the article of wear far from him, as though he hoped to lessen temptation, or to lure it from his own person.

"Dollars to cents I can brush the pearly drop from the end of his bugle without breaking skin!" cried Bully Baldwin, with a reckless laugh as he rested the tip of his revolver on his shoulder, ready to bring to a level the instant his wager should be taken.

"I whipe my own nose by my own selluf!" howled Dutch Dan, brushing an arm from elbow to wrist across that organ, with vigorous haste. "Dot maype vhas foon vor you vellers, bud—ow! ke-vit dot!" with a wild snort and wilder leap into the air as Bully Baldwin flung his pistol to a level, taking advantage of Dutch Dan's standing still to plant a bit of lead in one of those flat heels, tearing the lifts from the sole with deft yet stinging force.

"Steady, Dutch!" was a warning laugh, as a deft motion unlocked the parts and flung the empty shells from the cylinder, to be swiftly replaced by fresh cartridges. "Stiffen your joints a bit, will you? How can a man be expected to do neat work with you flinging yourself all over a quarter section after that careless fashion?"

"Mein Gott!" with a choking endeavor at calmness. "Vhas a boor duyfel to vreeze his dwo foots vast und schmile like a zlaughter-haus all der vholes you vellers makes foon vor yourselfs like dot? Gif me dwo, dree goons, und led me do some shootings by my own side—eh? Oafer id vhas dem schoon—v hell, gif me a leedie dimes, und you may haf dem in a hoory—I don't vwant 'em so bat like dot—no sir!"

Almost choking with the eagerness with which he pumped out these sentences, Dutch Dan dropped to the ground and began tugging at his heavy brogans, too excited to think of unknotting the stout leather strings, grunting and puffing, his protruding eyes glaring around in awful expectation.

Taken all together, there was something so supremely ridiculous in his face, his manner, his speech, his actions, that even Bully Baldwin—as cold, ruthless, smiling, heartless a desperado as ever disgraced the footstool by trampling upon it—broke into a merry laugh. And as for English Sparrow, he fairly laid down in the dust and rolled over and over, gasping and holding his aching sides with both hands.

"Yaw!" snapped Dutch Dan, with a sudden flushing of his gray cheeks as he shot a glance around him. "Id vhas too foony vor anydink! Id vhas too foony eafen vor laughing ad! Id makes my ribs achen shoost vor dinking uff id! Bud vait—shoost vait ondl your oncle makes von uff his nice leedle shokes! Den laugh und snigger—uff you kin!"

"Look out, mates!" panted English Sparrow, scrambling to his feet and ducking behind his nearest neighbor, peering forth with an exaggerated terror at the figure of the pilgrim, still tugging at his shoes. "E's a fighter from hover the water! E's beginning to snash 'is tushes—and they measure ha foot hin the clear!"

"Dot vhas a vol dot I took vor a man," with a scorching gaze at the little rascal, tearing one of the leather strings asunder and then hurling the heavy shoe with all the force of his muscular arm at the hairy face of the scoffer, causing him to dodge with more celerity than grace. "Dot vhas too leedle a skvrt vor un oldt soldier to notice more as py a sphank on his hindtost when I kin porrow a glove dot nopody vphants neffer ag'in to veat!"

"Meaning you, Sparrow!" laughingly cried Bully Baldwin, putting up his reloaded pistol as though the sport was over, so far as that implement of torture was concerned. "Good enough! Dutchland against Old England, forever! And I'm backing lager beer against bitter ale."

"Make a ring and let 'em fight it out!" cried another man, to have the words caught up by a score of others, though the chirp of the Sparrow was noticeable for its very absence.

"Lick the little critter, Dutchy, and you're free of Rough Robin from now until the crack o' doom!" laughed Bully Baldwin.

"Dot vhas easy enough, pe sure!" gravely nodded Goodykoontz, removing his second shoe, casting it aside and drawing his pack closer to his side. "I couldt lick him when I vhas sleepen. Bud now—shoost right now I other peesness gotten."

A chorus of derisive yells greeted this announcement, and the tide which had seemed to turn in favor of the badgered pilgrim, bade fair to change again, still more disastrously than before.

"If you ain't a natural idiot, Dutchy, you'll

lick him, or take a licking instead," frowned Bully Baldwin, from his position on the saloon steps.

"He couldn't lick one side o' Sparrow!" sniffed a disgusted miner.

"Maype dot vhas so," coolly uttered Dutch Dan, drawing his wooden shoes from the pack, and leisurely shaking the dust out of them before slipping them on his feet. "I neffer tried how dot licking comes oudt. Maype dot sbarrow vhas un eagle-pird in a fight. Maype I vhas some no-gount slouch py my own selluf. Bud who says dot, says a tam lie!"

Clear and stern came the last words, as the pilgrim leaped to his feet, slapping first one foot and then the other upon the flinty soil with a crack and a clatter that caused the circle to involuntarily widen, it sounded so much like business. And, too, the man himself seemed to have undergone a complete transformation. No longer pale, no longer terror-eyed, no longer shrinking and trembling like a hunted hare.

His tall figure was erect, and his shambling movements were no longer to be noted. Instead, he stood a man, in all that term implies.

Yet there was nothing of loud bluster in his voice or demeanor. He spoke deliberately, his gray eyes noticing none save Bully Baldwin.

"I vhill lick dot Sparrow, blenty soon, my goot friendt; bud nod rightt away now. Id vhas you dot make dot pullet knock mein fadder's bipe my moudt out, ain'dt it? Id vhas you dot pegins all tdis droubles?"

"Why, you infernal Dutchman—"

"Shoost stick a pin by dot, uff you please, my good v heller," coldly interposed Goodykoontz, with the ghost of a smile curling his lips.

"I vhas a bilgrim from Spitzenberg. Is dot Yarmany? No! Den I vhas no Dutchmans. Den you vhas lying when you say dot I vhas Dutchmans. Is it not so, my good friendt?"

"Do you dare tell me I lie?" sharply demanded Bully Baldwin, one hand dropping to his pistol, an ugly frown coming into his face.

"Vhas a liar or a gowart der vorst? Und vhas id not a gowart dot pulls a goon on a man vhat don't got nodding bud his dwo vists vor fightt maken?" drawled Dutch Dan, the smile deepening and broadening, at the same time taking on a trace of scorn that could not be mistaken.

"Keep away from me then, if you don't want a high lot, curse you!"

"Und you don't like a shoke?" with affected astonishment. "Shoost a vhaile ago, I dinks me dot v heller is plum rooning oafer wid foon! Dot v heller like a shoke, eafen when id cooms pack onto himselluf! Und now—vhaile a leedle, my good friendt!"

"I vhas a sdranger und a bilgrim. I vhas comen here to make my sober living, as un honest man shouldt. I vhas maken no droubles mit you, when you shoost my fadder's bipe my lips oudt. Dot vhas a dirty drick, und uff you vhasn't a gowart und a vhelp und a no-goot, you vhill come down dot sthep off vor a licking!"

"I vhas a man, und a vighter right from Spitzenberg! I vhas a vhalrus mid sixteen dushes, grossed on a bolar pear mit a plue dail! I vhas a prass bandt mit a zyclone addachment, und I vhas aple to vhip 'leven teen divverendt kindt o' dunes oudt uff you, my goot friendt!"

From grave to lively, from dignity to insolence. And as his excitement grew, Dutch Dan clattered back and forth in front of the astonished sport, his huge fists gyrating like the sails of a windmill!

CHAPTER III.

SOMEWHAT LIKE A SINGED CAT.

"WELL, if you haven't got the cheek!" gasped the handsome sport, staring wide-eyed at the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.

For the first time within the memory of Rough Robin, Bully Baldwin was actually taken aback, and clearly at a loss what to say or do. It came so unexpectedly, this change in one whom he had instinctively set down as perfectly harmless, and but a single remove from imbecility.

"More as dot—I vhas got dwo vists like dem, my goot friendt," nodded Dutch Dan, exhibiting twin masses of bony knuckles in a decidedly warlike manner. "Peesness is peesness, und voolishness vhas vorser as volly! Come und make a call py me, you v heller dot likes foon so awful v hell! Come und see how kvick dot Dutchmans make your hindt legs break off your neck off! Nein? Vhipped oudt already?"

Bully Baldwin flushed hotly and an ugly gleam came into his blue eyes as they flashed over the crowd, now audibly snickering at this wholly unlooked-for change of programme.

Without a better basis than his undeniable skill with the elegant pistols he carried, this handsome, dashing gambler had long borne the reputation of a chief, if not actually the chief of that section. His had been an almost bloodless conquest, yet scores of stout, reckless desperadoes had silently submitted to his smiling reign until now.

Partly because Rough Robin had pretty well passed the critical stage when each new-comer

is obliged to "find his level" before being fully admitted to citizenship. Partly, no doubt, because of Baldwin's frank diplomacy.

He was one of a class which is, happily, rapidly becoming extinct even in the more lawless circles; a gambler, whose sole badge of honor lies in the weapons he carries; a man who "is on the shoot," yet who is never so happy as when domineering over a weaker mortal.

He was just in the prime of life, and a model for a sculptor in face and figure; tall, broad-shouldered, trim-waisted, lithe-limbed. His hair was yellow as gold, and though worn closely trimmed, curled in little rings about his well-shaped head. A pair of mustaches hung droopingly over his mouth, pushed aside just enough to allow a glimpse of full lips, red as those of a woman. His eyes were large, of a deep, beautiful blue, seemingly frank and kindly as honor itself.

His garb was in close keeping with his character as a "sport," of rich material, fashionably cut, easily worn. The one exception to men of his class, lay in his manner of carrying his weapons, which were in a belt of silk webbing about his waist, in fair view of all who cared to look.

Just now one hand rested on a pearl butt, the fingers twitching uneasily as though itching to flash forth the weapon and once for all put an end to this loud-mouthed pilgrim. And that he did not hesitate, only proved how completely Bully Baldwin was taken by surprise.

"Your're ha gone 'coon, Dutchy!" chirped English Sparrow, dancing out from behind his living breastwork. "H'll 'ave to plant you hin the springtime hof youth, hafter hall—wuss luck me poor back! Why, ho why did ye go fer to do hit, ye bloomin' hidiot! Why, ho why did ye, me poor Dutchy?"

"Gif dot pull-galf more rope, somepody!" Dutch Dan flung over his shoulder, never once removing his gray eyes from the hotly flushing countenance of the gambler.

"Button up, Sparrow," laughed one of the crowd, a broad grin on his hairy countenance as he gave a backward kick that caught the little rascal on one shin, drawing a howling protest from his lips. "Don't ye see the foreign gent is flyin' at heap bigger game? It's a precious thumpin' he wants afore he kin look down low enough to see the likes o' ye, critter."

"An' Bully Baldwin's the laddy buck as kin do it, too."

"He's jest lookin' fer the whar to hit him fu'st, ye know."

The words were all right, but there was a laughing accompaniment to them that seemed to sting the gambler to the quick. Something that warned him he would make a great mistake were he to follow the savage impulse that urged him to drop this uncouth stranger in his tracks with a bit of lead before he could say more. Had he not said enough?

Ay! and more than enough! Chief though he was called, Baldwin knew that many a day must pass before he could expect to hear the last of this annoying affair; before the rough customers would grow weary of ringing the changes on the by-words which this clumsy foreigner had already given them.

"I don't want to hurt you, Dutch," he growled, showing his teeth in anything but a humane manner. "Clear out, while you're well off!"

"When I glear you oudt, my goot friendt," coldly nodded Dutch Dan. "When I makes dot eafen-up petween me und you. When I show you vot a glumsy shoker you vhas made uff yourself. Den I glears me oudt."

"I've shot men for less than that, you idiot!" frowned Baldwin.

"Vhas dey looking py your eyes in when you done dot shooting, my goot friendt?"

A roar broke from the crowd, and Bully Baldwin turned white as wood ashes at this speech. For an instant he hesitated, then a pistol flashed from his belt—and glittered brightly as it whirled through the sunlight high over his head!

So swift was the action that not one present could have sworn just how it came about. Dutch Dan made a motion—with hand or foot, which?—and the weapon was knocked from the grasp of its owner with such force that the member dropped to his side, temporarily paralyzed.

And then, before the gambler's deft left hand could arm itself, Dutch Dan stood erect once more, his cold gray eyes glowing over the round, rusty barrel of a huge horse-pistol.

"Keep dose vingers oudt uff droubles, my goot friendt," he cried, his tones harsh and menacing, though his leathery face looked blank and impassive as before. "You look v hell dot hole in. You see dot shunk uff leadt rooding down dot hole in. You say py your own mindt vhat makes dot when it splatters all uff mine vace oafer? Vhat kindt uff a shoke is all dot coming to, annyhow?"

"V hell, I don't mindt delling you vhat dot shoke says, my goot friendt. Id says dot you vhas blay der vool long enough. Id says you vhasn't bretty nigh so foony like you dinks, at foorst. Id tells me dot I plow you to der ritttle o' lasdt veek uff you don't come down from dot

high-horse und dake your licking like a leedle man!"

Whatever his failings, and they were legion, Bully Baldwin showed himself not wholly devoid of pluck, just then, though an ugly death was staring him full in the face. He made no attempt to draw a weapon, but he never flinched from that enormous bore. He even forced a smile as he called out:

"I say, gents, can't some of you lend Dutchy a decent tool to do his shooting with? I don't mind taking a trip over the range, since the cards say so, but if I die by a blunderbuss like that, I can never look the angels in the face—never!"

"Dem shents vwant to keep dem oudt uff dis bie. Dot vhas a shoke shoost big enough vor us dwo py ourselluffs."

"Then—shoot Luke or give up your gun!" with a reckless laugh.

"Vait a leedle, my goot friendt. I vhasn't a putcher py drade, und when a man goes deadt he don't can ask bardon uff a shendlemans vhat he insolts. Listden py me shoost a leedle longer."

"I vhas a sdranger und a bilgrim. I vhas making my own peesness mindt, when you shipped in like a shug vull uff badt whisky. You shoot dot bipe my fadder used to schmoke. You ram a pullet drough dot cap mein headt off. You make von uff my shoon go limp py der heel. Und you gall me *Dutchy*? Dot vhas der vorst foon all!"

"Listden py me yet a leedle longer, my goot friendt. I vhas un oldt soldier mans. I vhighs mit Sigel. I goes in a brivate, und I gomes oudt a shigadeer brindle. Dot makes me broud. Dot makes me madt all oaser when a vool insoolts me. Dot makes—"

"What is it you're driving at, curse you?" scowled Baldwin, as the eager crowd laughed now without even the pretense of disguising their amusement. "Shoot, and get it over with!"

"I don't vwant to shoot so—"

"Then what do you want, you infernal Dutchman?"

"To make dot shoke sthick py your memory," was the cool retort. "Und how is dot? Py licking sixdeen kinds uff sduffing oudt! Py bunching you dose knuckles mit! P—"

"Put up that rusty cannon, and I'll fight you too quick!" eagerly interjected the gambler, his blue eyes glowing vividly.

"A fair fist-fight! No shooting—no snap-shots!" cried one of the crowd, to have his words caught up by his fellows with a force and promptness that told the gambler they would stand no trickery.

"Dot shucks me rightt in der spoh where I lives!" cried Dutch Dan, promptly, carefully lowering the huge hammer down on the cap, turning about to place the antique relic on his partly opened pack. "Dot vhas shoost vhat I vhas dryin' to drife drough dot headt py you, my goot friendt!" with a broad grin as he glanced over his shoulder toward the gambler.

"Strip yourself, then, Dutchy," laughed the sport, laying aside his outer garments, but with the air of one already victor.

"Don't heat 'im hup the *fu'st* round, me lord?" chirped the Sparrow, beseechingly. "Don't cut the frolic too short hoff, hif you love me!"

"He would have it, you know," with a swift frown passing over his handsome face. "Bear that in mind, gentlemen, if it seems playing it rather low down on a clumsy idiot like that!"

A ring was promptly formed, and amid roars of mirth, the oddly matched pugilists confronted each other.

Bully Baldwin took a position that told of some knowledge of "the manly art," but Dutch Dan seemed all abroad as far as science went.

For ten minutes or more he bounced about, stiff-jointed, clumsily evading the strokes of the gambler, his leathern face stolid as ever, his gray eyes looking fairly fishy. But then—despite the rapid playing of the gambler's fists, Dutch Dan closed with him.

Tight locked in each other's arms, they swayed to and fro for a brief space, the ring of excited spectators giving way as they reeled across the boundary. Then, with a mighty heave and toss, Dutch Dan twisted his antagonist off his feet, fairly turning him over in the air, one of his heels striking English Sparrow alongside the head with a force that sent him reeling away.

Higher still—then the gambler was hurled headlong to the ground, with a shock that sent a shiver through more than one who breathlessly watched the outcome.

"Look oudt, or you dakes a dumble py yourselluf, my good friendt!" cried Dutch Dan, just the ghost of a smile lighting up his face as he stood with arms akimbo gazing down at his conquered adversary. "Shump up und dry it oaser some more! Put some sdicking vax py der pottom uff your shoon, und you don't vall down so easy!"

A long breath of utter silence as the crowd looked at that humbled figure lying in the dust, barely quivering, but showing no other signs of life, with his head doubled awkwardly under his twisted arm.

"Now he has got it!" panted one of their number, pale and awed.

"The Dutchman's broke his neck!"

"Whisky—get some whisky!"

"Give him air! Fall back—quit crowding in!" cried another.

But Dutch Dan was the only man who offered to actually assist the fallen gambler. With quick hands he straightened out the body, freeing the head, gently fingering the swollen neck, then rising to utter:

"He vhas shoost tired, shendts. He vhas not deadt, nor proken py der neck. Dot shoke vhas shoost a leedle too healdthy vor him!"

Dutch Dan picked up his pack and drew it aside, sitting down upon it and filling his porcelain pipe as he quietly watched the efforts of the men to revive the gambler. He struck a light, then slowly puffed the blue smoke in twin columns from his flexible nostrils, supporting his chin on his hands, plainly anticipating no evil results from the scene in which he had played such a prominent part.

But his rest was of brief duration, for with a vicious whistle, a lash tore the pipe from his mouth, and a shrill, feminine voice cried:

"Now I *did* catch you! Run away some more, vill you? Make a vool py Gretchen Stauffer, nodder time, eh! Oh, you brute—you peast!"

CHAPTER IV.

SUMMONED TO A PARLEY.

"HALT right thar, critter!"

"What's the matter wid ye, anyhow?"

"Halt, Tim Mahar, or I'll fit ye for a wake before ye kin mash another blade o' grass under them mud-splitters!" cried the stern voice.

"Divil make the bed o' ye, Ridge Tanner, iv ye lit that bloody goon spilt out its supper this way!" angrily yelled the little Irishman, his clinched fists shaking viciously, but his steps halting abruptly as he saw those dangerous eyes glancing along the leveled rifle.

"It isn't the likes o' you I'm wantin' to be wastin' good ca'tridges onto, Tim Mahar, but rules is rules, an' you'd ought to know the kind o' law we're runnin' this outfit under by this time. Stiddy, critter! You're nigh aplenty as it is. Now, what ye want up here?"

"Your betther, Ridge Tanner, bad luck to the eyes o' ye!" snapped the irascible Irishman, spitting viciously toward the barricade before which he was brought to a halt.

"Ye mean the boss, I reckon, Paddy-whack!"

"Divil wondher it puzzles ye to pick out the wan I mane by callin' for *your* betther, Ridge Tanner," with a fleeting grin. "But it's not dem'anin' mesilf I'll be talkin' to the loikes o' ye, annyhow, whin—"

"What's the row here, Tanner?" asked a clear, stern voice, as a tall figure came from the gloom beyond, casting a swift glance around after noting the hostile demeanor of the stalwart guard.

"That limber-tongue, Tim Mahar, boss," Tanner replied, with a half-snort, as he ducked his shaggy pow toward the Irishman beyond. "I see him sneakin' up this way, an' of course I halted the critter."

Thomas Penny strode forward and stepped upon the cross-piece of squared timber which lifted his head and shoulders above the top of the stockade. He saw the Irishman, still standing where halted, but he gave him only a passing glance just then, his eyes roving keenly, searchingly over the wild landscape like one who is searching for enemies.

"It's you, Misther Penny, thin?" called out the Irishman, instinctively touching a lock of fiery hair that drooped from beneath his sadly battered tile.

"You haven't seen anything else, Tanner?" muttered Penny, paying no immediate attention to the man without. "Keep all eyes open, old fellow! I don't trust them for a cent; and Mahar is one of the gang."

There was a stir amid the gloom to the rear of the two men, and several armed men stepped into the clearer light, looking half-asleep, but wholly ready for duty such as it might be.

Thomas Penny glanced toward them with a half-smile, waving his hand.

"It's nothing serious, lads. If you're wanted, I'll rout you out in good time, never fear."

"I say—Misther Penny!" cried the Irishman once more.

"Well, why don't you say it, Mahar?" sharply cried Penny, turning once more to the stockade. "You ought to know by this time that this is forbidden ground to the gang you train with. Then what brings you here?"

"The two ligs av me—what ilse?"

"It's legs you'll need to borry to git away with if ye sling out any more o' your lip, Irish!" frowned Ridge Tanner, with a significant motion of his repeating rifle. "Talk decent, or I'll come out an' wear the ground out with ye, for sure!"

Thomas Penny silenced his fiery follower with an impatient gesture, then spoke to the Irishman:

"If you are not drunk, Tim Mahar, you're acting the fool. Did you come all this way just for that, or have you a message from the rascal you serve? Out with it, in short meter, my fine fellow!"

"Is it for mesilf I've taken the thramp, ye

ask, Misther Penny?" was the deliberate response, as Mahar squatted himself down on a convenient boulder beside the trail, taking a stumpy pipe from the band of his hat and beginning to crumble a bit of plug tobacco in his doubled palm. "I'd be tillin' ye a loie av I was to say yis to that."

"It's lies that comes slickest from the gob o' ye!" growled Tanner, with a frown of anger at the impudence of the fellow. "Shell I stir him up, boss? Not to hurt any—jest to sting the haunches of him a bit, to make it easier standin' while he talks to the gent!"

Despite himself, Tom Penny had to smile; and rare indeed were smiles on his face of late days; but he only made a negative sign.

"Then you come from Lee Kavanagh, or from Keefe Valder, of course?"

Mahar was just lighting his pipe, and paused until his tobacco was fairly smoking before he vouchsafed a reply.

"It's a prophet ye'd ought to be makin' the sign av ye rade, Misther Penny, so ye had!" he nodded, between puffs, crossing his legs and bending over until his folded arms could rest upon his knee. "Sure it's the name ye lasht named that fits the gintlemon best as sint me on the wairy thramp this way the afternoon."

"You mean Mr. Keefe Valder; you have a message from him, then?"

Cold and hard grew the tones of the young man, though there came a strange look of pain into his brown eyes as he spoke.

"Is it a missige, ye ashk, Misther Penny?" hesitated Mahar, one hand rasping his stubby chin. "Was it a bit paper, now, may I wondher?"

"Get down to business, you rascal!" cried Penny, with a sudden heat. "If you have a message for me from your master, deliver it at once. If not—you know the way you came—git!"

"An' I'll never charge ye a cent fer the spur I'll lend ye, Irish!" cried Ridge Tanner, with a motion of his weapon that needed no further explanation.

"Av it's the bit paper, Misther Penny," deliberately added the messenger, "I'll pick it up on the way back an' send it to ye be a mon wid a bullet-proof hide. But av it's what was in the paper, sure—"

"What do you mean, you rascal?"

"An' that's aisy answered, Misther Penny," with a provoking grin. "I mane that the boss guv me a paper to bring to ye here. I mane that I losht it in the comin' so fur, but—"

"Shell I tickle the whelp, boss?" eagerly muttered Tanner as he caught that angry flush.

"If you have lost your message, what brings you here, you rascal?"

"That's what I'm thryin' to tell ye, Misther Penny, av ye wasn't so quick on the thrigger. Sure, what matter the loss, av it's ownly the bit paper that's missin'? Av I knew in the hid av me what was writ on that same, who's chryin' for the schrap? A teenty bit schrap loike that—not the bigness av a babby's fut, so it wasn't, now!"

"You dared read a letter written for my eyes, you scoundrel?"

"Aisy, Misther Penny, wid yer rashcals an' yer schoundrels an' yer harrud worruds loike thim!" with an ugly scowl as he rose to his feet.

"Is it the Unoited Sthates Mail I luk loike? Is it a letther, a bit schrap av paper loike yan? An' av it wasn't s'aled up, an' av I was fated to lose the same, is it gintleminly to kick up the divil's own deloight over it, jist bekase I tuk the trouble to rade what was writ intil it, so ye w'u'dn't be the loser at all at all? An' didn't the boss himsilf—a gintlemon, ivery inch av him: an' it's a bittther black loie I'd be tilling av I was to say I'd mit the loike since I tained the back o' me on him, sure!—didn't he tell me jist what was in the letther, so av I lost it I w'u'dn't hev all me trouble for naught? Eh? Eh? Till me that, now, will ye, Misther Penny?"

Tim Mahar ceased, only for lack of breath to continue. Lucky for him that he had a cooler head to deal with than Ridge Tanner, else his tirade would have ended after a far different fashion. Penny caught the threatening muzzle, pushing it aside, then called out:

"Deliver your message, and then pull out while your head's hot! A little of your tongue goes a mighty long way with men of our caliber, let me warn you—for the last time! What did Keefe Valder want?"

"He wants to see you. He has jist come back home. In the bit paper he axed w'u'd ye condescind to sthep over town an' mek him a call. An' w'u'd ye moind comin' this same afternoon, sor? Will I till him ye're comin', sor?" rapidly spluttered the Irishman, apparently realizing the peril which his impudence had brought over his head.

Tom Penny made no immediate response, a dark frown clouding his strong, honest face. One hand went up to his lips, trembling visibly as it rose. And Ridge Tanner grew grave and serious as he watched the young man whom he had learned to love as a father might love a son.

"Ef I might ventur' to advise, boss—"

Thomas Penny gave a start and cast a swift

glance around, not unlike one abruptly roused from a waking dream. He smiled faintly, but it was only a flickering ghost that as quickly faded away.

"I wouldn't go!" doggedly muttered Tanner. "I wouldn't run at his beck an' call! I'd send back word that the trail was plain enough to the Scottish Chief, an' that ef he wanted anything more—"

With a swift, half-playful gesture Penny touched those grim, bearded lips with his fingertips, then turned again to the stockade.

"Is it wrothin' the answer ye air, Misther Penny?" impatiently cried the messenger. "Av so, an' I'm to wait, sure I'll be more content av ye'll be so kind an' ginorous to sind down a wee dhrop av whisky that I kin be dhrownin' me impience in!"

"You brought a verbal message, and I'll return the same," coldly uttered the young man, his tones showing none of the struggling emotions that almost ren his breast; that caused his hands to grip the sharpened posts until the blood was forced back into his arm, leaving his fingers white and corpse-like.

Tim Mahar shrugged his shoulders, and resumed his seat on the rock. After all, it was a forlorn hope, and he was hardly disappointed at not getting the dram.

He cocked his head as Tom Penny lightly vaulted over the stockade and strode toward him, and one hand instinctively dropped to his middle, where depended a huge revolver. Only to fly out at right-angles as the sharp, menacing voice of Ridge Tanner rung out:

"Empty fingers, ye p'izen critter! Even tetch a gun, an' I'll let a streak o' daylight through ye too quick!"

"It's a flag av thrue I'm undher, ye moind now, gints!" the rascal spluttered, turning fairly green with apprehension as he glanced from that stern face to the threatening rifle over the stockade.

"You have naught to fear, Mahar, as long as you try no tricks yourself," coldly uttered the young man, his lip curling with scorn. "I've simply come to give you a message for Keefe Valder."

"I'll deliver it, Misther Penny—av I lose it be the way, sure I'll wear the two knees av me out but what I'll foind it ag'in!" Tim Mahar eagerly whined, showing the craven blood in his carcass then.

Tom Penny smiled coldly, then added:

"His message came to me by word of mouth, and he can take an answer after the same fashion. Go to your master. Tell him that you have seen me and told me what he bade you repeat. Then add this:

"Tell Keefe Valder that I deny his right to demand an interview on the matter of the Scottish Chief. Tell him that I look on his message as simply a request, not a demand, and that I will act upon it as such. I am going to town this afternoon, and I will call at his house. Can you remember this much?"

"Ivery worrud av it, sor."

"And see that you do not add aught to my words, you rascal," with curling lip and scornful eyes. "If you do, Keefe Valder will be apt to let me know as much. And then—I'll hunt you out, Tim Mahar, and pay you in full, even though you tried to hide behind the skirts of Lee Kavanagh himself! You understand?"

"Yis, sor," mumbled Mahar, ducking his head and shuffling away, with more than one uneasy glance over his shoulder, very different from his arrogant demeanor of advancing upon the fortified mine.

"You're not thinkin' of givin' that pussy critter a call, be ye, boss?" muttered Ridge Tanner, with an anxious light in his honest eyes as his employer returned by way of the opened gate.

"I am going to town, and I'll call at Valder's house—yes."

"I wouldn't trust 'em—I wouldn't trust 'em fur's ye kin toss a mount'in with greasy fingers, boss!" muttered Tanner, adding, coaxingly: "Let me go instid, won't ye? I want to go any-way—want to go bad!"

"How long since, old fellow?" with a light laugh that seemed more like old times, before the present trouble arose. "I'm going, Ridge, and I'll keep both eyes wide open, if only for your sake."

CHAPTER V.

A WARNING JUSTIFIED.

THERE was more than friendliness in the last words; there was an affection such as rarely exists between men in whose veins no kindred blood flows; yet Ridge Tanner was far from being satisfied.

"I know you'll do what you once sot on, boss, but all the same I'm mighty hungry to coax ye out o' the notion," he said, slowly, the wistful, anxious light deepening in his honest eyes.

Tom Penny laughed softly, but there was scant mirth in either his voice or his heart just then.

"Sorry for that, old chap, but needs must when the Old Boy cracks his whip! It's a mighty ugly bit of business, as none should know better than Ridge Tanner, but it's one that has

to be tackled sooner or later. And I reckon this day is as good as another for that!"

"The sooner it comes an' gits over with the better, 's what I'm sayin', boss, so long's it takes the right trail. It ain't the powwow I'm kickin' ag'in, ye mind; only the eend o' the line. Ef old Valder wants it talked over *thar*, that's plenty reason in my mind why it'd ought to come off *this way*—d'ye mind that?"

The reasoning was characteristic of the man, and Tom Penny was forced to smile at the earnestness with which Ridge Tanner produced it.

Still, he made no response. He stood with hands clasped lightly behind his back, his big brown eyes fixed on the far-away mountain-top, seemingly scanning the dark-green peak inch by inch, but in reality seeing naught; or, if seeing, noting nothing within his field of vision.

As he said, this was an ugly bit of business; one that bade fair to grow worse and more troublesome with the passage of time; one that could hardly bring peace, comfort or profit to any concerned in it.

"Ye don't know 'em as well as I do, Tommy, lad," added Ridge Tanner after a brief silence during which he vainly looked for sign or token of yielding on the part of the other, lowering his voice as he uttered that endearing title, though a keen glance around them showed him there were no eavesdropping ears nigh. "It's only the slick and smooth side o' Keefe Valder as you've looked onto as yit. You hain't see'd the devil outcroppin' like I hev, or you'd know that the pussy critter ain't sendin' ye no sech perlitte inwites without meanin' fer to git back double valie out o' it afore the bank closes. An' what the old man lacks, I reckon Lee Kavanagh kin furnish!"

Tom Penny started sharply at the last-mentioned name, his brown eyes giving an electric snap, and a flush coming into his bronzed face as it turned half-wonderingly toward the speaker.

"What about Lee Kavanagh, old chap?"

The ghost of a frown swept across the veteran's face at this proof of inattention on the part of the man whom he was so anxious to save from trouble and worse; but there was naught of anger or impatience in his tones as he responded:

"The devil's in him, an' heaps o' the old Satan's imps is *about* him, lad, only too ready fer to turn off the black work he hatches up!"

"And you think he's had a finger in this message?"

Ridge Tanner nodded a gloomy assent. Tom Penny shrugged his broad shoulders, a peculiar gleam leaping into his eyes as he muttered:

"Do you know, Ridge, I rather hope it'll turn out that way my own self? Somehow—curious, isn't it?—I feel just in the humor for a bit of business dealing with that same Lee Kavanagh to-day!"

"Which is jest what rattles me!" with a frown and nervous handling of his pet rifle. "Not—mind ye, lad!—not but I know you could keep up your eend to the queen's taste, ef Lee Kavanagh was ten times over the p'izen devil I reckon him up. It ain't that—no! But how ef it's jest this werry feelin' as the dirty rip is lottin' on in you? How ef that's what he banks on when he talked the pussy pardner into sendin' ye that blessed inwite?"

The veteran was so earnest in his speech, that it drew Tom Penny back to his usual cool, keen-witted and strong-nerved self.

His right hand grasped that of the old fellow, gripping it warmly, as though to soften the words that followed.

"You're building up a dough man, just for the fun of knocking it over, Ridge. Not that I think Kavanagh is any too good to play me foul if he saw a fair opening, but that day is not now. What if they were to lay me out? How much nearer to the Scottish Chief would they be then? You would block their little game, old fellow!"

"It's *you* I'm worryin' 'bout, not the durn ole claim," muttered Tanner, with a fleeting glance into that frank, half-laughing face, then turning sharply aside, ashamed of the dust that made his lids wink so rapidly.

Tom Penny frowned; not at the words of his faithful adherent, but at the memories they brought before his brain. The far-away look came back to his eyes, and for a brief space he forgot where he was, forgot his surroundings, forgot the passage of time itself.

A fair, proud, yet loving face seemed to float before him. A face which wore a smile, though the red lips seemed to be quivering with half-suppressed grief. A lovely vision, but one which vanished as rapidly as it came; and the rough tones of Ridge Tanner brought him back to reality once more.

"You know that Lee Kavanagh ain't even half-white, lad. A blind man could see so much with his two eyes shet tight, jest by the sort o' mob he keeps taggin' at the heels o' him! You know that he's tuck a hand in with old Valder, an'—"

"And knowing all this, don't you see that the quickest way to an end is to meet them on their own footing?" interposed Penny, with a shake of his broad shoulders, as though he would cast aside all save stern reality.

"But ef that eend winds you up with it?" persisted Tanner.

"So be it, then!" with a short, reckless laugh. "I only know of one true heart that would feel sorry—yours, old daddy!"

The old fellow tried to respond, but only a gulping, husky sound came from his throat. He stood shivering for a single breath, then turned and strode into the gloom that hovered about the entrance to the mine and the buildings surrounding it.

Tom Penny gazed after the veteran for a moment, the ghost of a smile playing about his lips. Then he passed into a low, rude building at one side of the stockade.

With a yawn, a squat, rough-clad figure came out of the gloom and after a glance at the rifle he bore, stepped upon the narrow platform running along the inside of the stockade, lazily searching the space before and to either side of him.

It looked oddly enough, this fortification, this constant guarding by armed men of those rude structures; but the explanation was simple enough when given.

Beyond those buildings, into the heart of the rugged hill, extended the workings of a silver mine which bade fair to prove a veritable "bonanza" to its owner. Just who that owner was, was in dispute at the date of this record, and it was to keep out a claimant whose rights were denied by those in charge, that this stout stockade had been raised, that these armed men stood on guard.

Tom Penny was not long within the office, for he had few preparations to make when his mind was once made up as to the course he was to pursue. And when he emerged, with a clean shirt and outer garments, he found Ridge Tanner awaiting him, now cold and composed, though the old uneasy light still flickered in his honest eyes.

"You're goin', boss, an' it ain't fer me to say that you ain't actin' all fer the best," he muttered, with a nod sending the sleepy guard back to his broken repose. "Still, ef I mought give a hint—"

"Why not, daddy?" with a low, soft laugh as their hands met in a warm grasp. "Don't you begin to put on frills, now!"

"Then—look out fer a trap—an' ef it springs, don't stop to count the odds afore you begin to pick trigger!" earnestly added the veteran. "An' ef the wu'st comes to the wu'st—waal, hell be my bed ef I don't even-up things as fur as killin' sech p'izen whelps kin do it!"

Despite his laughing, Penny was strongly impressed by the words and manner of the veteran, and his face grew grave as he replied:

"I'll keep on guard, never fear, daddy."

"Mebbe I'm a ole fool—mebbe it's nothin' but a skeer—but they's somethin' inside me that says you're runnin' into a nasty trap. You won't low me to run down to town in your place, lad?"

Penny shook his head quickly.

"I'm going, as I was sent for. You'll stop here, and if anything should happen—if I fail to come back on my own legs—well, you know what part to play, old fellow! Held the fort! Hold it until Gregor McGregor comes to relieve you of the charge! You will—of course!"

With those words, and without waiting to hear more, Tom Penny flung open the iron-studded gate, and strode briskly forth, never once looking back, as though he cared not to meet that appealing face again, just then. And with a husky growl, Ridge Tanner closed and secured the gate, mounting the platform, rifle in hand.

Despite the warning given him by his old friend, Tom Penny showed scant caution during the earlier portion of his tramp down the winding valley. His thoughts far outstripped his feet, swiftly as he strode along, for the original of that fair, blonde face seemed beckoning as though she would hasten his arrival.

Then, it really seemed as though the premonition which troubled Ridge Tanner had a foundation in fact. For, as the trail narrowed abruptly, passing between twin masses of frowning rock, two rough-clad figures rose from a mass of scrubbery, and barred the way.

As by magic, the brain of the Scottish Chief manager grew clear, and though he stopped short, there was nothing like fear or irresolution in his face or manner as he cried out, sharply:

"Have you turned road-agents, Jim Rich—Billy McShane? Or are you so drunk that you claim both sides of the road as well as the middle?"

"What we claim we can gather in, I reckon," sullenly growled the tall, gaunt, ungainly fellow on the right hand.

"Is it the boss you're thryin' to coom over the loikes av uz—ow! luk at two goons av 'im!" as a brace of revolvers covered their ugly faces, those brown eyes glowing sternly as they swept about in search of further danger.

"As you were!" sharply cried the mine-manager. "Empty fingers, you drunken curs! How many more are there at your backs?"

"Divil the more! an' I'm wishin' they wasn't so many av me, so I am, yer Hanner!" spluttered Billy McShane, cowering before the leveled tubes of death.

And yet Tom Penny could almost take oath that he intercepted a covert signal passing from one ruffian to the other. He felt confident that the rascals had counted on taking him by surprise, with no amicable intent, but their overpotations had dulled their wits sufficiently for him to turn the tables by his prompt and decisive action.

He smiled coldly at this, and spoke sharply, sternly:

"Who hired you to lay for me, you poor scoundrels? The same cur whose gold led you to try and throw over the property you were hired to guard? Is Lee Kavanagh at the bottom of all this? Out with it!"

"We ain't layin' fer nobody," muttered Rich, with a sullen, sidelong glance. "We ain't doin' no hurt, nor we ain't axin' no favors o' you."

"Because if he wasted his money on such poor devils as you two, he shows mighty poor judgment," laughed Penny, satisfied that the two ruffians were all he had to contend with just then. "I kicked you out of the mine because you tried to betray your trust. Shall I kick you out of my road now, or have you learned wisdom by that lesson?"

Confident in himself, scorning the two wretches, Tom Penny replaced his tools in his belt, and strode forward, his lips curling as he saw the drunkards fall aside, like cowards subdued by a master. Too confident, perhaps!

For just as he came abreast of them, a grating curse broke from the bearded lips of Jim Rich, and as though this was a signal, the two ruffians hurled themselves upon the mine-manager, only to be met by swift, stinging, stunning strokes from steel-like knuckles, that hurled them to the right and the left, bleeding, blinded, crying out harshly in choking accents as the enraged athlete followed up his advantage!

CHAPTER VI.

"BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA!"

THAT clear, viragoish voice seemed to fill Dutch Dan with springs that worked by instinct, for he leaped to his feet, pack in hands, using the dusty bundle as a guard to protect his head and shoulders from the lashes which fell thick and heavily.

"Run away some more times, eh? Make a fool by Gretchen Stauffer, I guess not! Hide vrom der vhimmens dot buys you away to dis coountry dot she may haf en a man to belong by herself—eh?"

"Mein Gott in Himmel!" spluttered Dutch Dan, pale and ghastly, ducking and dodging the hissing strokes that were aimed at his devoted head, but which were mainly spent on the deftly manipulated pack instead. "Dot vhas a grazy vhimmens proke loose some more! Dot vhas a bettigoot vull of lunadicks! Dake her away, somepody! Mein Gott! vhill no vons make some mercy on me dis time kvick?"

"Dot vhas lickings you vwant, more as mercy, you shack-shumper!" the youthful virago cried, laughing despite her evident rage at the outlandish caperings of the crestfallen hero. "Dot vhas a pig vool dot comes in der vace uff a vhimmens scorned vhen her vhas whipping a pig prute dot de dirty shake given her! Show me dot vool, and I show you two mans vhat is striped all oaf er my vhip from—dot's so!"

"Ho, Dutchy, 'ow could ye do it?" chirped English Sparrow, turning a handspring from pure delight at this unexpected "circus." "Ow did you find the cruel 'eart for to run away from han hangel hin dry goods like them? Ho, 'old me, somebody, 'fore I fly haway to realms hof heverlastin' bliss with pure delight! 'Ow's this for ha bloomin' lark!"

For the time being Bully Baldwin was forgotten, even by his most anxious friend, and all eyes were turned upon this fresh actor. And, apart from her decidedly viragoish actions, it was a far from disagreeable vision on which they gazed with laughter.

Gretchen Stauffer, as she gave her name, was young and in the very bloom of maidenhood, to judge from outward appearances.

She was neatly garbed, if not exactly in the height of fashion, from an American standpoint, looking as though she had just stepped out of her Fatherland, or from a stage where a German idyl is being played.

Upon her head was a quaint scarlet cap, or coif, its gilt tassel dancing gayly in the breeze raised by her own energetic movements. Below this hung twin braids of corn-colored hair, the ribbons at their ends fluttering and flashing as she dodged nimbly about with threatening rawhide, trying to catch the devoted Dutch Dan off his guard.

Her face was round and plump, brightly flushed, yet showing smooth and babyish in its healthy youth. Her eyes, large and blue, were filled with mingled anger and mirth as they flashed upon the recreant Daniel. Her red lips, parted by her exertions, showed small, even teeth, white as pearls.

About her shoulders was pinned a small shawl, secured behind her back after crossing over her plump bosom. A short skirt reached midway below her knees, under which showed "barber-pole" stockings, her feet being shod with trim, high-heeled shoes, silver buckles

gleaming in front as she danced lithely about with her instrument of vengeance.

On the whole, this Gretchen Stauffer was an attractive sight, and even in the height of their mirth, more than one present caught himself wondering why such an ungainly specimen of humanity as Dutch Dan should have deserted Gretchen, or why Gretchen should show such energy in hunting him down.

Having succeeded in backing Dutch Dan up in a corner made by two buildings adjoining irregularly, Gretchen paused for breath, though with a wary eye on the thoroughly cowed recreant as she addressed the crowd.

"I vhas ashamed to look you by the eyes, shendlemens; but vhat vhas a poor vhimmens to do? Vhas she to go gry dem two eyes her beadt oudt? Vhas she to veep and vail und bine all to noddink, or vhas she petter go hoot dot willain oudt dot makes a vool uff her?"

"Dot vhasn't me—dot vhas some oder mans!" spluttered Dutch Dan, ducking his head below his friendly pack once more as Gretchen turned with a vicious slash.

"Dot vhasn't you? Dot vhasn't Daniel Goodykoontz? Dot vhasn't der gruel loafer my money vhas puy a bassage dis gountry oaf er from Yarmany? Eh? Eh? You says dot, you willain?"

"Neff er see Yarmany! I vhas a Bigrim from Spitzenberg!" feebly murmured Dutch Dan, venturing a peep forth from his shelter, only to jerk back and hit his head a resounding thump against the boards as that vicious lash whistled toward him.

"Mein Gott in Himmel!" gasped Gretchen, with hands uplifted and wildly protruding eyes as they rolled over the interested crowd. "Mein Gott! shoost liden py dot! He don't vhas pin a Yarmany man! He vhas neffer in Yarmany! He vhasn't—vhell, dot takes der whole bie-shop!"

There came a brief interruption, caused by a stir on the part of Bully Baldwin, who groaned huskily as he sought to lift his head. Two or three men, recalled to a sense of duty, or humanity by this, pushed forward and carefully lifting the gambler between them, bore him away and into the nearest saloon.

Brief as the interval was, it served to compose the fair virago in a measure, though she still stood guard over Dutch Dan, never missing an opportunity to use her whip when he ventured his head out from the shelter of his pack. And as she addressed the amused crowd, her speech became less and less broken.

"You see before you, shendlemans, a vhimmen whose heart vhas broken vide open py dot gruel willain!" with a vicious cut at the exposed legs of the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg. "Dot vhas my cousin, Daniel Goodykoontz, und ve vhas bringt up side by side like leedle ainsbells. He vhas not so pooty, but he vhas my cousin, und ve vhas deadt in lofe each odder with, before I comes dis gountry oaf er."

"Divil blame him fer that same, thin!" cried an Irishman, honestly. "Sure, ma'am, it's meself that's fasht goin' the same road, now!"

The hard, vengeful look on the girl's face vanished like magic, and her whipless hand passed swiftly over her garments and fluffy hair with coquettish instinct as she glanced through her lashes at the impulsive digger.

"It's making foon uff a poor girl?" she murmured, softly; so softly that Dutch Dan peered out from behind his pack with astonished amazement.

"Divil a more airnesht c'u'd I be av I wor to know ye this cinthury past, me darlin'!" with a vigorous nod in affirmation. "Sure, me honey, why will ye lit the mimory av a dirthy spalpeen loike that make throuble in the hairt av ye, vhin there's manny a better b'y standin' harrud by who'd jump at the chance to mek ye a married wuman—an' it's Teddy Malone that's tellin' ye the same, now, so it is, me darlin'!"

"But—but I sent him money to bring him this gountry to!" murmured Gretchen, her eyes flashing anew as they turned toward Dutch Dan.

"Sure, can't we tek it out av his dirthy hoide, thin?"

"Or chip in with a shake-bag purse," laughed another.

"But it was more than money," added Gretchen, her voice resuming its hard, vengeful tones as memory turned once more to the past.

Though her excitement caused her blue eyes to glow and flash, she pronounced her words far more perfectly than at first.

"So much more—listen by me, shendlemens! Listen to me while I baint a picture of my bast—like dis!"

"Back in Yarmany—Yarmany, I say still, Dan Goodykoontz!" with a swift lash as a denying murmur came from behind that pack: a sound of stranger and pilgrim and Spitzenberg. "Back in Yarmany," with an eye on the cowering figure still, "I was a young girl, but I was oldt und big enough to know what lofe meant. I lofed that mans you see dere by his vace hid-ing—lofed him grazy-madt!"

"He was much oldter as me, den; but dot makes noddink; he was my cousin, und I lofed him like two house on fire! Und when I tooks me the sdeamer for dis gountry, I tells me some time ve meets again und married got by each other!"

"Well, I come to this gountry alone. I was

not so oldt, nor so ugly as my gran'mudder. I find more as one Yarmany man in dis gountry. I find more as one who say he lofes me hardt if I let him begin dot vay. But I shut my eyes und my ears, und neffer listened more as I had to. For why? In dot heardt by my breast vhas still blanted dot lofe for my cousin, und dry me so hardt as I vwant, I gouldn't bluck it out der roots by—neffer."

Her clear, musical voice faltered, growing husky with repressed emotion, and the flashing of her big blue eyes grew dimmer. An uneasy motion stirred the crowd, and faces grew darker, ugly glances shooting toward the cowering figure by the building behind the pack. If the deserted maiden longed for vengeance upon the recreant, she was in a fair way for getting it at the hands of these rough men.

"Und so it went on, shendlemens," she resumed, her musical voice graver, sadder as it seemed. "I neffer thought me such droobles was coming to me when I worked so hard, laying money by for fetchen my cousin this gountry to, for my sweet lofe! I n-ffer thought he would vool me so wicked, eafen when he come dis gountry to, und I shumped his neck on with both my arms dot day py Gasdle Garden—no! Neffer do I make me worry when I see dot a vhimmens was hanging by his goat-dails—no! Neffer—until dot vhimmens shump me back on, und bull my hair my head oudt like a vury bossessed!"

"Dot vhas all a misdake, Gretchen!" whined Dutch Dan, to dodge back with ludicrous celerity as the enraged maiden turned upon him with flashing eyes and uplifted whip.

"A mistake your vetching a vhimmens oaf er by you—baying vor her comen my gelt mit, eh? A mistake she pulls my hair oudt, eh? Den it vhas a mistake dot I'm Gretchen Stauffer by dis day yet!"

"It's a mishtake that naden't lasht longer than the foindin' av a parson or a praist, me darlint—so it naden't, now!" cried Teddy Malone, pushing forward, though several pair of sturdy arms sought to bar his passage. "Sure, O'I'm riddy an' hoongry to take ye up, me purthy pet, an' make ye the happiest av wimmen this blissed noight, now!"

"Play fair, Irish!" cried a laughing voice that was half in earnest for all that. "Give the rest of us poor critters a show fer our good looks, won't ye?"

Gretchen stood glancing from face to face, the grief and anger gradually dying out of her big eyes, and a smile beginning to lighten up her plump face. Clearly, there was a spice of coquetry in her composition, despite the vigor and persistency with which she had pursued her recreant cousin. And, unless appearances were unusually deceitful, she would not wear the willow many days longer.

"Fair is fair, an' we ain't axin' more than that, ye know, Teddy," spoke up another of the company, while still others seemed to gaze upon the plump, pretty German girl with growing interest, awakened by the words of the impulsive Irishman.

"Hof with the hold love, afore you're hon with the new, me dear," chirped English Sparrow, grinning and rubbing his claw-like hands in high glee at the "circus" he had been the prime means of instituting. "Give the ledly ha fair chance, gents, cawn't ye? Don't rush 'er hup to the haltar without time to pluck hof the willows haround 'er bloomin' brow. Hit's Dutchy she's come seekin', hand she's too hawfully modest for to heven look hat banother man w'ile 'e's still to the fore, don't ye see?"

There was a brief silence, during which a sudden pallor came into the face of the girl as her big eyes roved swiftly from face to face, reading there the awful thoughts to which that malicious speaker had given birth by his choice of words.

Dutch Dan gave a low groan, as well he might. For one far less cowed than he might have read the ugly truth; might have seen that dire trouble was brewing in those ugly, covert glances which passed from man to man. Not a word was spoken, until Teddy Malone cried out:

"Why not, thin? Av a man is dirthy vago-bones enough to threat a ledly loike that, what use is he in livin' longer? What worth is he beyant sarvin' as a weight to sthretch a new len'th av rope, anyhow?"

"Goot-py, Gretchen!" murmured Dutch Dan, with a ghastly smile, as he dropped his pack and took a single step forward. "You vabs got eafen py me und dot vhimmens—you vabs make my neck go stretchen py dot new robe; but I didn't vabs blame you so big—nein!"

"Holt, my goot friends!" cried Gretchen, impulsively. "Uff you go hang my cousin deadt, vhat I do me vor a mans—eh?"

CHAPTER VII.

MEETING THE ENEMY.

NEVER in his life had Thomas Penny been more dangerous than just when those two drink-blinded ruffians rose up in his pathway. Yet he was never colder, keener, more deliberate than when he showed such apparent carelessness in putting up his weapons and striding

forward as they shrunk back nearer the rocky wall.

For days he had been "eating his heart out." For weeks he had been holding his fierce passions in check, doing battle with himself, keeping his brain clear and striving to forget his own wrongs and sorrows, the better to defend and care for the trust placed in him by another. Through all that time he had fought down bitter temptation, knowing as he did that the day and hour must surely come when the killing curb must be relaxed.

And as soon as he saw these two men, he knew the time had come.

He knew how bitterly they hated him for having discharged and driven them away from the Scottish Chief on discovering their half-formed plans for turning the property over to the enemy. He knew that they meant him evil, though he thought it strange neither had tried to drop him by a shot from cover before showing themselves.

And so, though seemingly laying himself open to attack, man was never more entirely on guard than Thomas Penny when the drunken roughs sprung with fierce curses to crush him beneath their cruel feet.

Tall, strong, skilled with his fists, in perfect physical condition, it was but a poor feat for the mine-manager to evade and foil that blundering attack. Swift and crushingly shot out his arms, every blow cutting deep and clean, hurling the brutes back against the rocky wall, to go down in quivering, helpless heaps before his advance.

Hard and sharp the young athlete laughed as he stood between two loathsome objects, glancing from one to the other, his blood-marked hands ready to make the punishment complete in case of need. But neither Rich nor McShane made an effort to arise. Instead, they lay so still that a grave shade shot into the fierce face of their conqueror as he hurriedly stooped over the nearest, to rise a moment later with a breath of relief.

"Knocked out—no worse!" he muttered, rubbing the red stains from his hands with a scornful curl of his lips. "If that's a sample of your best, Lee Kavanagh, you'd better sell out!"

He stripped the defeated ruffians of their weapons, opening the revolvers and extracting cartridges before shattering the tools upon a rock, then snapping the ugly blades beneath his heel, casting the fragments upon their carcasses, then striding down the winding valley.

"I'm glad I run up against 'em!" with a curl of his lip and a keen flash of his eyes. "No matter whether they were sent by Kavanagh or chipped in of their own accord, it's done me heap good! It's brushed the cobwebs from my brain, and cleared my mental atmosphere like a thunder shower on a sultry day!"

He showed this in his face, in his movements, even. That haggard, jaded look was gone. His eyes were keen and clear as diamonds. His every movement quick and full of life and strength and resolution.

A few minutes more carried him within sight of Rough Robin, and he paused at a little brook that crossed the trail to wash his hands and remove the spots of blood from his person as best he might, before cutting across the main trail, his gaze fixed on a comfortable house which stood on a little elevation just without the scattered limits of the mining-town.

In this house lived the man whose message Tim Mahar had so boggled—Keefe Valder.

A vivid light leaped into the brown eyes as they rested on this building and for one breath his lips quivered as with strong emotion. But only for an instant. His head tossed back, his nostrils dilated, his figure swelled. And then, cold, stern, composed, Thomas Penny strode up to the front door, rapping quickly with his knuckles.

It seemed as though his approach had been noticed, for almost immediately the door opened, and Keefe Valder himself stood revealed.

"You are welcome, Mr. Penny, most welcome!" he bowed, his tones smooth and oily, yet giving one a disagreeable sense of insincerity.

He stepped aside, but the mine-manager made no move to enter, just then, saying in a cold, restrained voice:

"Then I did not misunderstand Tim Mahar? A most clumsy messenger, Mr. Valder; it was difficult to believe he came from a gentleman!"

A flush swept across the full face of the other, and something close akin to anger leaped into his half-closed eyes; but his tones were smooth and suave as ever when he made response:

"I was in too great haste—too anxious to have this miserable mistake smoothed over, my dear sir, to lose time in seeking a more fitting ambassador. Still—you are here, and—I beg you enter!"

With a cold, stiff inclination of his head, Thomas Penny removed his hat as he crossed the threshold. And yet there was a vivid, almost hungry glow in his brown eyes as they roved swiftly along the passage, as though the mine-manager was expecting or longing to recognize another and more kindly face. But if so, he was fated to suffer disappointment.

Keefe Valder closed the door, then led the

way into a room situated on the right of the entry, stepping quickly to one side as Thomas Penny followed after, leaving the manager confronting a dark, stern man.

"My friend and partner, Mr. Penny," purred Keefe Valder, bowing and smiling as he gracefully waved one plump hand toward this person. "I believe you have met my good friend Lee Kavanagh before though?"

Harder, sterner than ever looked the young mine-manager. Coldly he gazed into that darkly handsome countenance, but gave no signs of recognition, uttered never a word in response to that introduction.

A hot glow swept across the face of Lee Kavanagh, but he spoke up sharp and clear:

"Oh, curse your infernal ceremony, Valder! I know the gent, and I reckon the gent knows me well enough to get along without an introduction. Stow preliminaries, and get down to solid business."

Thomas Penny turned toward Keefe Valder, saying coldly:

"I came here at your invitation, on business. I will not go without listening to what you may have to offer, but I'm free to say that had I known you included Lee Kavanagh in the meeting, I would have thought twice before promising to call."

The dark man laughed harshly.

"Stick to business and Lee Kavanagh won't bother you much, my good fellow; but he's grim death on tricksters, you want to bear in mind!"

Keefe Valder was staring from one to the other, the very personification of mortified surprise, either real or else most admirably assumed for the occasion. Now he stepped between, with shaky tones:

"Gentlemen—my dear sirs—I beg of you not to—"

Tom Penny smiled coldly, but with a complete change of tone:

"You are right, and I was wrong, Mr. Valder. This is pure business, and personal feelings should be kept for a more appropriate time."

He seated himself as he spoke, cool and composed, a man with all his wits about him. Just the shadow of a scowl flitted across the full face of Keefe Valder, as though he would far rather have found less keen wits. But if so, nothing in his words or manner betrayed the fact just then. He drew a chair so that the trio sat forming a sort of triangle, a round table between them on which rested a decanter, glasses and a box of cigars.

Tom Penny shook his head with a faint smile as he declined both.

"Thanks. I never indulge during business hours. A mere habit, of course, but too strong for easy breaking."

"May you never know a worse habit, my dear fellow," laughed Lee Kavanagh, filling his glass to the brim and tossing off the fiery liquor as though he found it particularly grateful.

Keefe Valder also drank and lit a cigar, though he seemed far less at ease than did his dark-browed partner.

He was tall and portly, of good presence, well dressed, unless it was in displaying too much jewelry. He was partly bald, his remnant of hair, like his full beard, being thickly sprinkled with gray threads among the jetty blackness. His features were fairly good, and doubtless before age and increasing flesh gained upon him, he had been even handsome after a bold fashion. His eyes were black as night, and still full of fire when they were fairly open; as a rule he kept them partly closed, shaded by their long, heavy lashes.

Lee Kavanagh, also, was dark, after a fiercer, more brigandish type: the type one so often finds among men of Irish birth. He was tall, of good figure, broad-shouldered, lithe yet muscular in the extreme. His face was clean-shaven, his cheeks and chin showing bluish black where the razor had robbed his luxuriant beard.

His garb was rather peculiar in one of his reputation, closely resembling that worn by a country priest or brother: black coat, buttoning high over his breast and reaching to his knees when he stood erect; a narrow white line showing above his heavy stock or cravat. His trousers were also black, fitting low over his boots.

Keefe Valder was the first one to break the brief silence.

"As you know, Mr. Penny, I have been absent from town. I was detained longer than I anticipated, but I never dreamed that such trouble would have come of that delay. Had I been here—"

"You are speaking of the Scottish Chief, of course, Mr. Valder," coldly bowed Penny. "Before you go further, may I ask just what report you have received in that connection?"

"What but the simple truth?" flashed Kavanagh, his eyes aglow. "That you laugh at his claims, that you swore you would kill each and all who attempted to take possession of his property!"

"Because I believe you were lying when you advanced those claims, was the cold retort. "That for you; I am dealing with Mr. Valder now."

"Kavanagh told you that I left him in charge of my business during my absence, didn't he?" slowly asked Valder.

"Ay! and showed him my credentials, as well!" flashed Kavanagh.

"Which I refused to recognize, of course," bowed Penny.

Keefe Valder flashed a swift glance into his face, frowningly.

"By what authority, may I ask, Mr. Penny?"

"I can answer you, sir, more fully than I would answer that man," was the cool, steady response. "He came to the mine, and bluntly demanded possession, saying that you had purchased it—"

"Which is nothing more than the simple truth, my dear sir," with a sudden return of his customary blandness as he opened a drawer in the little table, taking therefrom a packet of papers, but keeping them under a fat hand as it rested on the cloth. "I have purchased the mine known as the Scottish Chief, with all its buildings, its plant—in short everything connected with the claim."

"Since what date, may I ask?"

"Since the third day of this month, to be precise. And ever since that date you have been an—ahem!—sort of usurper, in point of fact, my dear fellow!" with a low, smooth laugh that flatly belied the keen, restless, uneasy gleam in his jetty orbs.

"Much the same thing I told the gent," nodded Kavanagh, refilling his glass. "But he wouldn't listen to me, and I—well, you gave me strict orders not to get into a row, you know, Valder! Only for that—"

"I said then, what I repeat now, to you, Mr. Valder," gravely uttered the manager. "I said I was placed in charge of that property by a gentleman who trusted in my honor and fidelity. I said that I wanted to make no enemies, but that until I was relieved of my charge by the gentleman—by Gregor McGregor himself—I would hold that property intact while a drop of blood flowed in my veins!"

"But, my dear fellow, I've bought it! The mine belongs to me! I've got the papers—the original patent itself—to show for my claim. I have it here, right under my hand, this very moment!" spluttered Keefe Valder, flushing with amazement or rage—possibly both.

"Have you nothing more than that?" slowly demanded Penny.

"Isn't that enough, man alive?"

"No, sir!" was the quick, stern response. "Not if you brought forward a thousand patents! I will deny them one and all!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FAITHFUL UNTO STUBBORNNESS.

KEEFE VALDER stared open-eyed. Lee Kavanagh forced a laugh, harsh and far from natural.

"Was I so far off when I hinted that a little brief authority had turned the brain of our good friend?" he laughed, leaning back in his chair with curling lips and glowing eyes.

With an effort Keefe Valder rallied, his tones far from steady.

"I thought you were mad when you said it, but now—what is it you mean, Tom Penny? By what right do you deny my claims? Why, you—"

A quick motion checked his speech, backed as it was by those glowing brown eyes, that stern face.

"Hard words will not bring us to a better understanding, Mr. Valder, as none should know better than yourself."

"But if sober reasoning fail to make any impression on your infernal obstinacy, what else remains? Tell me that, will you?"

Little remained of his accustomed suavity. His jetty eyes gleamed angrily, his smiles were turned to an angry frown. His fat hands turned into hard clinched fists. Just then Keefe Valder looked wicked.

But Tom Penny showed no signs of quailing before the storm of wrath his speech had awakened. Cold, resolute, even hard.

"I was placed in charge of this property by its sole owner, Gregor McGregor, and to me he will look for a faithful accounting. While I draw the breath of life that trust shall never be betrayed."

"But I tell you he has sold me the Scottish Chief!"

"In person?"

"What matters that?" impatiently interposed Kavanagh. "The mine has been bought by us, and paid for. We demand possession of it. Refuse to turn the property over to us, its rightful owners, and take the consequences!"

"You saw Gregor McGregor in person?" persisted Penny, paying no attention to the younger partner.

"I did. But what has that got to do with it?" asked Valder, forcing composure.

"And he sent no word to me direct?"

Keefe Valder gave a start, flushing hotly, feeling in his breast pocket with a dumpy hand.

"Bless my soul if I didn't forget all about it!" he spluttered, bringing to light a number of

documents, singling one out and thrusting it across the table as he added: "I never did such a thing before! I meant to have sent it to you by Tim Mahar, but in my amazement and—I must say it, sir!—my anger at your high-handed proceedings, it slipped my mind until this very instant!"

With a face that was graver than ever, Tom Penny took the envelope and tore it open, extracting a slip of paper on which were written a few lines, beneath which, in bold, angular characters stood the name of his employer, Gregor McGregor.

Keenly, if not exactly openly, the partners watched the strong face of the mine-manager as he slowly, carefully scanned those written words; but if they counted on gaining any information thereby, they were fated to disappointment. Not a line altered, not a muscle moved, though they could see that Tom Penny was reading the brief contents more than once.

"I don't see how it came to slip my memory—unless it was as I explained," murmured Valder, filling a glass of liquor and slowly sipping it off as he leaned comfortably back in his chair, his keen eyes watching Tom Penny over the glass. "McGregor cautioned me particularly, too, about sending or handing the note to you, and—well?" he asked, as the manager lowered the note, carefully refolding it and slipping it into his bosom. "Is that just what you wanted my dear fellow?"

"It might have saved trouble and words had you produced it sooner—yes," was the grave response. "You say you have the patent there?"

"Ship-shape and Bristol fashion!" laughed Valder, evidently hugely relieved as he ruffled the documents before him, selecting one from the rest and pushing it across the table.

Lee Kavanagh seemed far less at ease, and silently stretched out a foot to give his partner a warning touch. Their eyes met; his full of warning, those of the elder man perplexed; but no words passed between them then.

Tom Penny took the paper, unfolding it and keenly, closely examining it, both print and pen work. This did not require long, in one of his practical knowledge in mining matters. It was simply a printed blank, filled up in ink with a description of the claim, "Scottish Chief," conveying by Gregor McGregor, to Keefe Valder, his heirs and assigns, all rights, etc.

"Well?" again asked Keefe Valder, impatiently. "Are you still a Doubting Thomas? Is there anything more you can ask for? If so—well, time is long, and you're my guest!"

There was no response while the mine-manager refolded the patent and passed it back across the table. Then he spoke:

"I have no fault to find with that document—"

"Thank high Heaven!" piously breathed Lee Kavanagh, with an upward roll of his black eyes.

"The blank is properly filled, and the transfer seems in due order, even to the signature of Mr. McGregor," coldly added Penny, paying not the least attention to the younger partner.

Keefe Valder laughed softly—his old laugh, showing how completely he had recovered his wits after that unexpected balk of a few minutes before—as he slipped the patent into its envelope, and returned the documents to their original resting-place in the drawer.

"If I were inclined to be captious, my dear fellow, I might easily flash up at that; it would be so easy to suspect a slur against my honor, you know! Right? Of course it is right! I've paid my good money for the property, and if anything was wrong—well, I'm not vindictive as a rule, but in that case I'd run old McGregor down and scorch him, if it took my last dollar and last day on earth!"

"I never dreamed of questioning the honor of Mr. McGregor."

Did Keefe Valder flinch a little at that grave sentence? If so, he had not time to resent the implied doubt before Kavanagh cried:

"Then we can call the whole matter settled? We'll take possession to-morrow, and make the old Chief think an army of gophers has invaded his bowels! Eh, Valder?"

"If Mr. Penny is perfectly satisfied," with a bow and bland smile that could not entirely conceal the uneasiness—vague, yet distinct—which the stern gravity of his guest inspired in him even now. "I want everything clear and smooth sailing, you know. I'm not a man of war—never was, never will be, I hope and trust. Eh, Mr. Penny?"

"Can you tell me where Mr. McGregor may be found just now?"

"What has that old codger got to do with it?" flashed Kavanagh, his unruly temper again getting the better of his caution. "He's got our good money. We've got his mine. Or, if we haven't got it exactly, we will have it in the morning, or know the reason why!"

"I ask you this, Mr. Valder, because I fear there must still be a mistake underlying this sad affair," gravely added Penny. "I try to think it merely an oversight—merely a slip of memory, born perhaps of a press of business, but—"

Keefe Valder set down his glass with a jar that made the table echo, his full face flushing

hotly, then turning pale—the pallor of hot anger, not of fear.

"But—you've butted enough, Mr. Penny! You've butted too much! Butted the patience clean out of me, sir, and guest though you be—under my roof-tree though you are—I'll put up with no more of it! In one word—and the briefer that word, sir, the better it will suit me—what in the name of obstinacy have you raked up now?"

"Better use too many words than not enough, in an important matter like this, Mr. Valder," coldly retorted the mine-manager, gazing steadily into that flushed face. "There is a vast fortune contained in the Scottish Chief—"

"Would we have bought a petered-out claim?" sneered Kavanagh.

"And Mr. McGregor left it in my charge. He knew the responsibility, just as I know it now. He said he could trust me. I swore to prove faithful to the trust, and—"

"And you have done so, until now that trust is no longer yours to maintain; don't overlook that slight fact, Mr. Penny!"

"Because you're too infernally rigid in your views and methods to suit either of us as a manager, don't ye know?" mocked Kavanagh, who seemed bent on bringing about a quarrel which only force of arms could decide.

"That trust still remains, and I'm in duty bound to preserve it, despite all you have said and advanced, Mr. Valder," still coldly ignoring the younger partner.

Once more Keefe Valder stared with sunken jaw at the young man. His flush faded to give place to a yellow, sickly pallor. He seemed half-stupefied by that cold, resolute defiance.

Something like a shadow of regret flashed across the face of the mine-manager. He had particular reasons for regretting an open and positive rupture with this man. The words he felt forced to utter cut him to the very heart; but they must come forth. His trust came before all else that was purely personal.

"I knew that Mr. McGregor would not sell the mine without seeing me, or at the very least sending me a note announcing that fact."

"Which I have just handed you," muttered Valder, rallying again.

"I have no fault to find with the words written in that note. The signature seems perfect, and—"

"Go slow, Tom Penny!" grated Kavanagh, starting to his feet, with hotly glowing eyes. "Dare to hint at forgery on our part—"

The mine-manager also rose from his chair, his face white and hard-set, showing no reluctance to measure strength with the younger partner even under that roof; but Keefe Valder sprang hastily between them, grasping Kavanagh in arms that were still powerful, still hard to be overcome, sharply grating:

"Back, hothead! Leave him to me, or—"

Lee Kavanagh sullenly submitted, though still glaring wickedly at the mine-manager.

"Let him guard his words, then! Another hint like that, and I'll find the depth of his heart, though a dozen men stepped between!"

Still standing, Tom Penny added, his tones cold and even as before:

"I charge no one with committing forgery, least of all you, Mr. Valder; but I do say this: if Gregor McGregor wrote those words, signed that name, he did not intend me to accept them as authority."

"Will you kindly explain your precise meaning, Mr. Penny?" deliberately asked Valder, pale but composed, once more the shrewd, keen, ready-witted man of business.

"I mean this: if Mr. McGregor had meant me to accept that note as authority he would not have left it incomplete. He would have added at least one more stroke of the pen. Failing in that, I have but one alternative: to refuse to recognize the order it purports to convey, and still retain control of the Scottish Chief."

"You listen to him, Keefe Valder?" hoarsely cried Lee Kavanagh, once more rising from his seat, a hand thrust into his coat as though in quest of a deadly weapon. "You hear him insinuate that we have attempted to steal the mine through a rank forgery? You hear—and stomach all that?"

Valder again stood between the twain, but seemed at a loss what to say or do. And seeing this, Lee Kavanagh, his fiery passions getting the upper hand, flashed a vicious oath at Tom Penny, and strode forward, only to be caught in a vise-like grasp, while Valder cried:

"I'll not have it! I'll have no fighting under my roof, I tell you for the last time, hothead! Simmer down, or—by the Lord! the shortest way is the best! Go out and cool your hot blood! Will you go decently, or must I force you?"

Lee Kavanagh suddenly ceased his struggles, forcing a laugh as he uttered:

"After all, it is your roof, and I'll go, quietly as a lamb."

And without another look at Penny, he passed out of the room.

CHAPTER IX.

"LOVE MY DAUGHTER, LOVE ME!"

KEEFE VALDER bore his partner company from the room, closing the door after them

with a glance into the pale, stern face of the mine-manager as though warning him against any attempt to follow after.

Nothing was further from the thoughts of Thomas Penny. If his decision had been promptly made after the summons for a parley, that was because he had done his thinking beforehand, knowing that something of the sort must soon come before him. And so deciding, he was the last man in the world to turn aside before a final settlement.

For good or evil, Keefe Valder must understand just where they two stood on this matter of the Scottish Chief.

Thomas Penny was still standing rigidly erect when the speculator returned to the room, having disposed of Lee Kavanagh after a slight delay; but if there was no change in the young man, there was more to be noted in the face and demeanor of the elder.

It was as though that brief absence had brushed all anger, all indecision, all doubts and astonishment from his face if not his mind. And as he resumed his seat by the little table, pouring out a glass of liquor with a hand that was steady as fate itself, his voice rung out clear and business-like, yet with a tinge of authority underlying all.

"Be seated, Mr. Penny. Now that Kavanagh has gone, you and I can determine this little dispute in a dozen words."

"I wish we could—I wish it most sincerely!" muttered Penny, showing more emotion than at any time since entering the house.

There was just the ghost of a flash to be caught in those jetty orbs, though they were so swiftly veiled by their lashes; and there was a smile about the elder man's lips which he hastened to conceal by lifting the glass before them.

"I told Kavanagh as much when I sent him out of the house to cool his hot brain. A valuable fellow in many respects, but far too nimble with his tongue; far too much like gunpowder for his own safety, let alone interests. But pardon me; this is not business; and you and I have got to talk business right from the word go!"

Tom Penny sat down, his face grave and troubled. He was not so particular about hiding this, now that the man he both hated and despised had left the room, no longer able to laugh or sneer at his discomposure. As for Keefe Valder, he knew only too well what deep and bitter cause there was for this perturbation.

"You know, Mr. Valder, how deeply I must regret having to antagonize you in aught; but what can I do? I have a sacred trust. If I were to betray that, how could I hold my head erect in the light? I could not do it! I must do my duty, let what will come!"

The speculator flung out one hand with a mocking impatience.

"Talk and sound—empty sound and mighty foolish talk, if you are beneath my roof-tree! What is your duty? To act the part of an honest man. Is it honest to hold a gentleman out of his own? If so, then you are playing the part of honesty this day!"

There was no response. A quick glance showed him that his off-hand argument was wasted, thus far, and his voice grew harder still.

"For more reasons than one, Thomas Penny, I am reluctant to come to an actual rupture with you. Only for this shrinking, I would have shown you the door long since—would have cut your insolence short by acting as any other gentleman would act under the circumstances. As it is—I will give you one more chance to make your peace."

The mine-manager forced a smile, but it was only skin deep.

"If it really is a chance, I'll grasp it as eagerly as they say a drowning man will catch at a floating straw."

"First: explain what you meant when you said that note to you from McGregor lacked the stroke of a pen. I can give a pretty shrewd guess, but this is too serious a matter for guessing: what we want is the plain, naked truth."

"If you have had business dealings with Gregor McGregor, you must know he is a shrewd, cautious, yet far-seeing man."

"Scotch as his name: more than that is superfluous! Go on."

"Being such, Mr. McGregor had strong doubts of the mail service; he believed or fancied a letter was not safe from inspection, always, and so it came to be understood between us that I was to pay no attention to his written words, unless the communication bore a peculiar and secret sign, known to us two alone. If that was there, what I read was to be my law and authority. If it was lacking, I was to wait for further instructions, and while waiting to conduct myself and my trust precisely as if no message had reached me."

"And that note did not have a secret sign, then?"

Tom Penny hesitated, but only for a moment. His face turned just a thought paler, but his voice was clear and steady as he replied:

"There was a sign—faint and distinct enough to eyes that knew where to look for it—but not

the sign bidding me respect the words as written."

Keefe Valder flashed a swift, burning glance across the table.

"Will you please make your meaning clearer, sir?"

"It is not so easy—you can guess how hard I find it, Mr. Valder," with a brief unsteadiness in his voice. "Do not make it still more difficult for me, by jumping to a conclusion when I say that that secret sign told me to read each word directly opposite to what it pretended to command: told me that, from some cause over which he had no control, Gregor McGregor felt compelled to pen those lines."

Keefe Valder half sprang from his seat, a hot, angry flush coloring his face, his jetty eyes glowing as though backed by living fire. But with a desperate effort he regained his self-control, resuming his seat and forcing a smile: cold, shallow, even less assuring than a scowl.

"In plainer words, you mean to insinuate that Gregor McGregor was forced at the muzzle or revolver or point of knife to sign away his rights in the Scottish Chief? And you accuse me of this? Me—the father of the girl you pretended to love dearer than life itself?"

Twice Tom Penny tried to check this speech, so angry, yet so cold and bitterly scornful; but Keefe Valder only raised his tones higher, and fearing lest other and dearer ears should catch them, the mine-manager refrained, waiting until his host ceased with a short, hard laugh.

"I insinuate nothing, Mr. Valder," he said, gravely. "Still less do I bring such a serious charge against you, of all men. You demanded an explanation, and I was obliged to give it. If I spoke at all, I felt compelled to speak the truth and let naught lie hidden."

"It sounds vastly more like romance than truth," with a cold smile that lacked little of being a sneer. "One would fancy we lived in brigandish Italy, to hear you prate!"

"I may be mistaken—not as to the meaning of the secret sign; that is, unfortunately, only too plain! It may be that, in the hurry of business, Mr. McGregor gave the wrong token! You saw him write the letter?"

"I saw him write the letter."

The mine-manager gave a long breath of relief then added:

"It must be so, then! He must have made a mistake! Where did you leave him? Where can I find him soonest?"

Keefe Valder turned colder and sterner at these eager queries. He drew himself erect, leaning one hand on the table beside which he stood, the other thrust into his bosom. His jetty eyes glowed vividly as they rested on the agitated face opposite. His tones were hard and coldly measured as he spoke again:

"My business with Mr. McGregor is finished. He has accepted my money, and transferred all his rights to me. Where he is I know not; if I knew, I would decline to give you the information you ask so strangely. If you brought Mr. McGregor to my door, I would turn the key upon both him and you. I would refuse to recognize him or you by word, sign or action, so long as I am kept out of my own property."

"But you—for the sake of one whose peace of mind is even more precious to me than my own manhood—I will give you one more chance to redeem yourself. Think well before you decide: for when you have once made known your election, there can be no change."

Without pausing for a response—indeed a peremptory wave of his plump, white hand forbade the mine-manager speaking—Keefe Valder left the room, his steps firm, his manner proudly haughty.

Thomas Penny sunk back in his seat, covering his face with both hands, his athletic figure quivering with powerful emotions. Right well he knew what was coming. Too well he knew that a temptation was waiting, a thousand-fold greater than all he had so far resisted.

He knew that Keefe Valder was playing his last card, and he also knew that he must prove false to his trust, or else do battle such as mortal man is seldom called upon to show.

He tried to cool his burning brain. He sought to gather his powers of mind and body, but with miserable success. He could only think of the terrible trial being prepared for him. Only feel that he must show himself a traitor to his employer or false to his love!

It was well that the waiting did not last long, for minutes such as Tom Penny lived through then, age more than as many years of ordinary experience.

As the door opened, the mine-manager sprang to his feet, pale as a corpse, shaken and agitated, to fall back a pace or two at the sharply uplifted hand of the speculator.

Keefe Valder was not alone. At his side, restrained by one plump hand, was a tall, graceful figure; her face was only briefly visible, for after that first hurried glance at the young man, she hid it against the shoulder of her father.

"Not yet, Mr. Penny," coldly uttered the father, as he made that peremptory gesture. "I wish to utter a few words before you say or do aught; before you even recognize Miss Valder."

"Be merciful, as you hope for mercy in time of need, sir!" huskily muttered the mine-manager, closing his eyes with a shiver, after one yearning, longing glance at that fair form.

"Am I not merciful?" sharply retorted the speculator, with a hot glow in his eyes that lasted only an instant. "But I did not bring my daughter here to listen to a dispute over empty terms, though I am perfectly willing she should decide which shows the truest mercy, you or I, when this painful matter is finally ended."

"For nearly a year, Mr. Penny, you have been a welcome visitor to this house. For half that length of time, you have been a suitor for my daughter's hand. For three months you have been lovers; and that with my free assent and good will."

A low murmur from the face hidden against his shoulder checked his cold, measured speech. He passed an arm tenderly about the trembling form, gently smoothing the blonde tresses with his other hand. But he came prepared to speak plainly, and Keefe Valder was not a man to be easily turned aside from a deliberate purpose.

"For ten times the value of this mine, I would not have had this ugly misunderstanding arise; but since it has come upon us, there is but one way to deal with it. You say Mr. McGregor secretly ordered you to deny my rights. You even insinuated that he made the transfer under compulsion. Stop!" with sudden sharpness, as Tom Penny attempted to speak. "I claim the right to state my case and clearly define my position without interruption, sir!"

"Were I to listen to your arguments; were I to even consent to your hunting up this rascally Scotchman, leaving my claims in abeyance meanwhile, I would be insulting my own honor! When you cross my threshold, you do so as an avowed friend, or else as an acknowledged enemy. If the first, well and good; I will be foremost in searching for McGregor to clear up the mystery, as you persist in regarding this vile trickery."

"On the other hand, if you accept the other alternative, you do so with your eyes open. You deliberately throw away my friendship. You coldly resign all hopes of ever making child of mine your wife!"

"Still, I wish to give you every chance, for your own sake quite as much as the sake of my daughter. And with that intention I leave you together; you have one hour in which to shape your future course!"

CHAPTER X.

DUTY EVEN BEFORE LOVE.

As he uttered these words, Keefe Valder moved forward, gently placing his daughter in the chair which he had occupied during the early part of this strange interview, then drew back with a grave dignity.

"I am trusting your honor far more than you seemed inclined to believe in mine, Thomas Penny. If I am a father, I have also been a lover, and I know from past experience that you will prefer to speak without witnesses. All I ask is this: be tender with Alcina, even as you are just to yourself—and me!"

He turned and passed out of the room, closing the door softly behind him, leaving the lovers alone with each other.

Tom Penny made an impulsive step forward, his trembling hands outstretched, only to fall back the next instant with a shiver of self-distrust. He dared not give full sway to the mad love that fought for liberty. He feared it would betray him to dishonor!

Alcina was sitting with head bowed and face hidden in her hands, half-suppressed sobs agitating her lithe, graceful figure. But, as the minutes passed by without word or motion on the part of her lover, she lifted her head, gazing up at his face, tears in her large blue eyes.

Even then Tom Penny held himself in check. Even then, with that beautiful face—lovely despite the traces of sorrow and care and tears—before him, wearing such a wistful, anxious look, he was strong enough to hold back, to conquer his mad longing to clasp her in his arms, to press his lips to hers in a clinging kiss, even though they were to sever forever the next minute.

"Tom!" muttered the maiden, faintly, "will you not even speak to me? Not even one little word?"

Then—the barriers gave way, and with a hoarse, inarticulate ejaculation the mine manager sprang forward. Alcina leaped to her feet, and fell into his outstretched arms.

They were lovers in the truest, purest sense of term. Their lives were bound up in each other. Apart, they were miserable. Together they were in paradise.

Until this miserable trouble arose, Keefe Valder, her sole surviving parent, had smiled benignantly upon her love. There was not a cloud visible; not a doubt or a fear to mar the perfect bliss of their love-dream.

And the storm-clouds had arisen so swiftly, so blackly!

"Is there no hope, dearest?" murmured Alcina, after a short space, leaning back until she could gaze into the face of her lover, yet making no effort to free herself from his ardent clasp.

The shadow came back to the face of the lover at her words. They recalled to him a sense of his duty, doubly hard and doubly disagreeable after those moments of fierce indulgence.

It was hard, but Thomas Penny was a man of iron will, and not easily conquered even by love so intense as that which he felt for Keefe Valder's daughter. It was not without an effort, but he gently, firmly loosened those clinging arms, and placed his love in a chair, dropping to his knees before her, clasping her white hands between his own.

"Only in delay, my darling," he answered, his tones husky and low. "Only in gaining time enough for finding Gregor McGregor, and thus clearing up the mystery of this transfer. And that—you heard him intimate as much—your father will not grant."

"And you—you are just as firm, dear?" with a wistful light in her tear-dimmed eyes, a piteous quivering of her red lips. "You will not yield to his wishes, then?"

The mine-manager flushed hotly, then turned paler than ever as he started back; only to be caught by those white hands. He yielded to the touch, but though he resumed his position at her feet, his words were hardly those of one whom love renders forgetful of honor.

"Surely you are not tempting me to prove false to my trust, Allie? Surely you would not have me go against my firm belief? Anything but that! Don't make me lose my faith in you, darling."

For answer Alcina Valder bent forward and pressed her lips to his brow; an answer far more eloquent than any she could have shaped in words, agitated as she was just then.

Tom Penny bowed his head until it rested in her lap, and she felt a hot, scalding tear moisten her hands as they lay beneath his face. She gently lowered her own head until her cheek touched his brown curls.

Silence reigned for a few moments, neither of them being fit for coherent speech just then. But, if lovers, if deeply in love, if powerfully shaken by trouble such as none but true lovers can ever know, they were both persons of sense and strong will. They knew that time was fleeting, and that they must reach some settled decision before the return of Keefe Valder for his answer.

Tom Penny was the first to move, tossing back his brown curls as he forced a smile, gazing into the pale, beautiful face of his love.

"That is over, Allie, and I'll not try it again. I've had a hard fight of it, these past weeks, and when you kissed me—it knocked all the pride and stiffness out of me!"

"Did I not see it, dear?" also forcing a wan smile as Penny took a chair and placed it close beside her. "If I had not—no!" catching her breath sharply. "I could not be angry with you, even when you doubted me most!"

"It was myself I doubted, not you, little girl," his arm stealing about her, drawing her head over until it touched his shoulder. "I knew that I had only to yield my ideas of what was right and just; I knew that you would accept all I said or might do; and it looked such an easy way out of a wretched tangle! All I had to do was to act on the papers shown me by your father. And in doing this, I would be upheld by the law, by the public, by everybody—save my own conscience."

Alcina nestled still closer to him, smiling through her tears as she looked up into his face, pure and ardent love shining from her eyes, perfect trust in every line of her lovely being as she murmured:

"I don't pretend to understand it at all. All I know is that I trust you—I know that whatever you do must be right!"

She looked as though she felt this speech deserved a sweet reward, but Tom Penny did not pay it, just then. His face showed even graver than before, and his tones were far from steady as he spoke again:

"Even if by my decision we are separated—forever, it may be!"

"Not that—you do not mean that, Tom?"

"It may come to that in the end; unless your father changes his mind, I do not see how it can well be otherwise," was his gloomy reply.

Alcina drew back, even that faint, tearful smile vanishing from her face. It was no easy task to control her voice, but she managed it.

"Tell me as plainly as possible just what the trouble is. Do not soften your words to save my feelings; I want to know all—it is my right, and I will take no denial, dearest Tom!"

It is hardly necessary to follow the mine manager through his recital, since the affair has been shadowed forth with sufficient distinctness to answer our purpose for the present. Enough that he made the matter clear to the maiden, who gave him the closest attention.

"Lee Kavanagh is at the bottom of it, if there is really mischief concealed at the back!" she cried, impulsively.

"I thought as much myself. Of course I never blamed your father with aught crooked."

"Of course not!" with the perfect faith of a true daughter. "I told him I was sorry he took that rascal into partnership, but he only laughed at me; what was I to know about business affairs

or business policy? Nothing, perhaps," with a half-defiant nod of her shapely head; "but I did know this: that Lee Kavanagh tried to make me say I would marry him! And though I refused him as plainly as possible, he refused to take no for an answer, saying that time and perseverance would overcome my scruples—the ugly, insolent wretch!"

There was more than words in the glance which she cast into his face; that look added: "after you, my love."

But Tom Penny did not notice it. He was busily thinking, trying to see a way clear through the ugly tangle. And this confession but added to the difficulty.

Lee Kavanagh loved Alcina Valder. He had proposed, and been rejected. Yet he was now a partner with the father. Together they laid claim to the Scottish Chief, and so far their interests were identical.

Valder had insinuated that if he, Tom Penny, was to yield his conscientious scruples so far as to take the letter of Gregor McGregor at its face value, and on that order turn over the property to them, he might still claim Alcina as his bride.

Was Lee Kavanagh a man to so tamely resign the woman he loved? Would money value alone be sufficient to reconcile him to letting a rival whom he hated so intensely carry off such a delicious prize? For beyond a doubt he knew just why Keefe Valder had summoned the mine-manager to that interview; he must know what reserve card the speculator was prepared to play!

"It is crooked, just as I suspected first off!" he mentally decided. "That black-browed demon has got the old man into a tangle, and is playing a double game, with Valder as a cat's-paw! Let me come to terms, and he'd soon have a hired knife between my shoulders."

"Am I forgotten, dear Tom?" at length murmured Alcina, breaking in upon his gloomy reflections with a girlish petulance that sat most charmingly upon her. "Have you nothing more to say to me?"

Tom Penny turned and drew her close to his heart, passionate love in his motion, in his face, his eyes, his tones, as he uttered:

"If the worst comes to the worst, darling, you will not fail me? Though we are forbidden to see each other, you will not forget me? You will not let them crush your love—let them break my heart, even as they are striving to break down my honor? Say that you will keep true to me, darling, even as I am fighting to prove true to my sacred trust?"

"I love you—I will love you while my life lasts, let what may arise between us, Tom!" was her low, but firm response.

The young man drew a long breath of relief, a smile coming through the trouble upon his face. It was just what he needed, this positive assurance of perfect love, of perfect trust. Now he felt that he could fight his battle with a stout heart.

Hurriedly he told her the fresh suspicions which her admission had inspired him with, adding:

"That is only another reason why I must hold on to the trust Mr. McGregor placed in me. Were I to yield—were I to accept the papers they bring forward, and turn the property over to them, I believe I would be sealing the fate of your father by so doing. I believe that Lee Kavanagh is at the bottom of it all. I believe that, the prize once fairly within his grasp, he would not hesitate to add murder to perjury and forgery. I believe his next step would be to remove his partner. Do not shiver so, my little woman! We will foil the scoundrel, never fear!"

"I was thinking—thinking that he might strike at your life, too!" murmured the maiden, her voice unsteady, her face paling anew.

Tom laughed softly, though there was precious little mirth in his face or in his heart just then; but anything to keep his love from borrowing trouble in advance. Heaven knew they would have enough of that, let them try to avert it as they might!

"I'm on my guard, you know, little woman, and my hand can keep my head against a score of such blustering bullies as this Lee Kavanagh. And I have plenty of good and true friends in and about town, you must remember, so there is really little to fear from him on that score. But while he remains in his confidence the rascal is far more dangerous to your father. It is of him we must think first."

"And you—you will hold the mine?"

"Until Gregor McGregor comes to relieve me of my trust," was the prompt, resolute response. "Even though so deciding may keep you and I apart for days and weeks, my precious! It will be hard—harder than words can tell—but sweet as love is, honor is still more precious in my eyes. All I ask is for you to be true and faithful—"

A deliberate rapping on the door announced the return of Valder.

CHAPTER XI.

CANDIDATES FOR MATRIMONY.

LEE KAVANAGH, having once yielded, left the room and house with a very fair grace, even pausing on the threshold to beg his host's par-

don for losing his temper. This may have been natural courtesy, or it may have been—far more likely—for the purpose of deceiving other ears than those of the gentleman he addressed. At all events, while making his apologies he was glancing keenly along the hall and up the flight of stairs leading to the second story, with the air of one who hopes or expects to catch a glimpse of another being.

If such hope was in his mind, it came to naught. All was silence, and no one seemed stirring in the building save themselves.

"I'll not keep you waiting longer, then," with a shrug of his shapely shoulders, turning on his heel and putting on his hat, adding: "I'll call this evening, of course, to learn what decision you gents have arrived at. Until then, be good to yourself!"

Light the tones and pleasant, but when his back was fairly turned on the closing door, a dark and ugly scowl swept away that false smile, giving a glimpse of his actual emotions.

"Ten thousand curses blast the mulish rascal!" came gratingly through his teeth. "Anywhere else—anywhere but under the roof that shelters her! I'd have slit his throat without mercy!"

Lee Kavanagh gave an abrupt start as the sharp reports of firearms came clearly to his ears from the lower part of town, and in the bright glow that filled his dark eyes, in the swelling of his muscular frame, the easy and instinctive movement of a hand toward his hidden weapons, there was betrayed the fire-eater.

He stood listening, his nostrils quivering. There were more shots, mingling with faint, indistinct cries.

"Some of the boys on a jamboree, I reckon. There's too much noise for simple business," he decided, losing his intent manner, that ugly scowl returning to his face once more.

His head bowed, and one hand rose to his red lips, his other palm supporting its elbow as he slowly walked along, buried in thought. Not pleasant or comforting musings, or his dark face belied itself.

Only once did he utter articulate sounds:

"Bend or break, you whining, hypocritical cur, I've got you foul! Bend you will—the foul fiend himself couldn't resist such a sweet temptation! Bend—promise—enjoy your triumph while you may, for I'll have a death-grip on your throat mighty soon!"

This was enough to point the course of his reflections, and they were of interest sufficient to occupy his evil brain so wholly that he only realized whither his feet had carried him when a cry of eager excitement forced its way to his ears. Then—he stopped short, gazing intently at the tall figure of Daniel Goodykoontz, who had just hurled Bully Baldwin headlong to the ground.

He could not catch a fair view of his face at first, but there was something about the pilgrim that seemed to strangely interest him. And yet—he shrunk back, his right hand rising a little higher, as though to hide the lower portion of his own face!

Through all that followed, Lee Kavanagh was an eager if silent spectator, his peculiar interest only deepened by each view of that gaunt face. He kept well in the background, like one who prefers seeing to being seen. More than once, when Dutch Dan turned his eyes in that quarter, he averted his own face, though his hat was slouched far over his eyes, and once even moved back until the corner of a building hid his person from view.

Then came Gretchen Stauffer, with her avenging rawhide, and Lee Kavanagh seemed to grow more sorely perplexed. Surely he was growing foolish. This cowering Dutchman could never be—

One by one the scales seemed to drop from his eyes, and long before Gretchen ended her tale of betrayed trust, Lee Kavanagh felt convinced his excited imagination had run away with him. And yet—the old doubt would break in again!

Still, he was cool enough to see that trouble of a serious sort was brewing for Dutch Dan. What had been started as a grim jest, bade fair to end in dread earnest.

A man's life did not count for very much even in Rough Robin at that respectable period of its growth. A year before, Dutch Dan would have been growing stiff before one half as many words were wasted over his shameful treachery to a young and charming woman. Now—there were strong hands reaching out for his life when Gretchen Stauffer interfered with that quaint plea.

Lee Kavanagh saw his peril, and though he kept telling himself that his first suspicions were worse than wild, something urged him to interfere before it was too late, and he was already at work when the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg dropped his pack and confronted his enemies.

A gesture attracted the attention of English Sparrow, who cooled down with marvelous rapidity as he recognized a master.

"You set this going, you rascal!" muttered Kavanagh, sternly. "Do your best to choke the boys off. I don't want that fellow strung up—just yet! If he does go—I'll even-up on you!"

Kavanagh passed along the skirts of the crowd, dropping a word here and there, while English Sparrow, outwardly gay enough, but with a far from easy mind, wormed his way to the inner circle chirping:

"Be'old the man, my hangell! Gaze hupon thy 'umble slave, 'oping hand praying to find favor hin thy heyes! Be'old, my charmer! hon my knees H'I hoffer myself ha substitute for that graceless hanimal 'oo hisn't fit heven for 'anging hafter so shamefully habusing thee!"

Gretchen turned a pair of widely opened eyes upon the rascal as he dropped on his knees before her, one hand outstretched, the other clapped above his heart, a languishing expression struggling through his bristling beard.

"Vhat vhas biting you, I likes me to know?"

"Love—celestial love, my hangell!" chirped the Sparrow, rolling up his eyes until they were lost in their sockets. "You basked for ha man, hand 'ere 'e his, ready for to pour healing balm hinto that bleeding 'eart! Ready for to—"

"Vhas you dot man?" interposed the maiden, with tossing head and scornful lip. "Den I misdakes me; I takes me a bull-derrier insdead!"

A burst of laughter followed this blunt speech, and Teddy Malone, until now held in check by pure amazement at the matchless audacity of the little rascal, sprung forward, jerking English Sparrow to his feet, whirling him about, then sending him endlong into the roaring circle with a vigorous kick.

"Begone wid ye fer an impident divil! Is it the loikes av ye that a leddy w'u'd be woipin' the fut av her an, whin thayre's min to the fore, jist for the crukin' av her littile finger? Augh! ye make me t'row up the supper I ate a full y'ar ago, so ye do, wid the base impidence av ye—schat!"

Gretchen laughed merrily at the ridiculous manner in which the amorous manikin tumbled through the crowd, but then she grew sober, one plump finger rising to her red lips as she sighed:

"He vhas a leedle vool—so leedle! Bud maype he might grow some more—nein? Und—und—he vhas somedinks like a mans, after all!"

There was no mistaking this speech. Gretchen was in quest of a man, and would not rest content without finding one!

During this bit of comedy, Lee Kavanagh had done his work well. The larger portion of the gathering were men whom he could control by a word, and though he took no active part in the matter—merely dropping a hint in the ears of two or three in whom he could place reliance, then falling back to watch the result—by the time Teddy Malone kicked English Sparrow out of the lists, the danger of hanging was pretty well banished.

It all had started in a jest, and just as it only required a single malicious impulse to turn it into a tragedy, just so a hint that Lee Kavanagh had a better use for Dutch Dan than hanging, turned the scales to the side of mercy.

It was once more a farce, yet with an undercurrent of earnestness. All were laughing, yet more than one in the circle was beginning to look at this comely stranger with a longing eye. Why not?

Available women were few and far between in Rough Robin. Gretchen was young, good-looking, formed for loving and to be loved. A bit of a virago, mayhap; but that was rather a recommendation to these "wild and woolly" citizens; they rather liked a stimulant!

"Loike a man?" echoed Teddy Malone, with a scornful sniff toward English Sparrow, just then limping to his feet. "Loike a man, is it ye say, ma'am? Yis! as an impty egg-shell is loike a full-feathered gamecock—no more than that, darlint! An' av it's a man ye're wantin'—what's to hindher Teddy Malone from fillin' the bill, I dunno?"

"Or any one of a score handsomer men!" cried a laughing voice from the outer circle, as a tall, muscular digger pushed his way forward and stepped within the ring, bowing ceremoniously to Gretchen as he added: "One of whom I am which, ma'am!"

"Aftther me is good mahnners, Dave Flint!" cried Malone, with a ferocious scowl, bristling up to the laughing giant like a bantam in the face of a shanghai. "Wasn't I the foorst wan to spake out, now?"

"You haven't got your location stakes planted, though, Teddy."

"That's gospel truth, anyhow!" chimed in another digger, catching the infection and pushing forward. "A fair shake is no more'n right, says me! Let the leddy take her pick; but all start in on a level!"

"Good as wheat!"

"So say we all of us!"

"Fall into ranks, gents! Put your best foot forward, and muster up your sweetest smile! Who knows where the lightning may strike? It's a 'way-up lottery; there's only one prize; but that's enough to cover the lucky man with pure bliss a thousand fathoms deep!" laughingly cried Dave Flint, drawing his massive frame rigidly erect, standing "on inspection" as only one who has served in the ranks can stand at will.

Gretchen seemed half-pleased, half-frightened by this curious change in the programme, and

fell back a little, finger on lips, head bashfully bowed, but with a bright sparkle in her big blue eyes which could not be entirely hidden by their long lashes.

Teddy Malone looked sour and discontent, but he was wise enough to realize that matters had gone too far for him to control at will. He was hotly in earnest, but he knew that he must take his chance with the rest.

And that number was rapidly increasing, until it seemed as though the entire company wanted a wife, the worst kind!

One by one the diggers, gamblers, bummers, came into line, straightening up and putting on their best looks for the occasion. Some were laughing or grinning at the gay joke. Others were more serious, seeming to look at it as an important business operation. But each and every one was taking a deeper interest in the affair with each shy glance which Gretchen cast along the growing array.

If she was pretty while flogging her recreant lover, she was ten-fold more charming now, blushing, half-laughing, half-mocking, a coquette from scarlet coif to silver-buckled shoes. Did Dutch Dan think so?

Forgotten by all save Lee Kavanagh, whose glowing eyes were keenly scanning his face and figure, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg stood gazing at that trim, plump figure, grave and pre-occupied. And something like a spasm of anger flashed across his face as he beheld Gretchen move a trifle nearer that line of matrimonial candidates, glancing from face to face with growing interest as though she, too, was beginning to take the joke for sober earnest!

Dutch Dan fumbled about for his pipe, but that consolation was denied him. Knocked from his lips by that avenging whip, he had not been given time to recover it. And then, with an air of desperation he stepped forward and actually took up his place in the line, calling out:

"Gretchen—my Gretchen! Maype I vhas pin a pig vool 'pout—"

The girl turned upon him, her lip curling with scorn as she cried:

"Gif dot galf some more rope, somepody! He vhas too loudt!"

CHAPTER XII.

"HE THAT WILL NOT WHEN HE MAY."

WITH a swift motion Dave Flint tripped the pilgrim from behind, dropping him heavily in the dust, crying out sharply as he did so:

"Take a back seat, Dutchy, will you? Your hand's cold, and you're out of the game for this deal!"

A swift, agile bound carried Gretchen to the spot, her rawhide cutting the air with a vicious whistle, her eyes sparkling vividly, her voice filled with something of the temper she had displayed when first stepping upon the scene.

"Vhait a leedle—*you*," quivering her whip before the astonished giant. "Vhas *your* name Gretchen? Vhas it *you* dat Yarmany man spoke mit? Answer me like dot uff you please, my goot friendt!"

Dave Flint meekly bowed his blonde head, crossing his hands over his bosom, his stentorian voice lowered to a mild and humble whisper as he made response:

"Please, ma'am, I didn't go fer to do it! My hoof jest kinder let slip, an' the Dutchman stumbled over it—so help me John Henry!"

There was a laugh struggling with the look of anger on her face, but Gretchen conquered it quickly.

"You make a shlip in more vays as von, maype, my goot friendt. You vhas too kvick dem hoofs mit. I vhas not ask *your* hellup. I vhas not dalking py *you* when I call oudt bull-galf; a sheeb would fit you petter as dot oder prute, I dinks me now!"

Despite his *sang froid*, a hot flush leaped into the giant's face as a loud laugh broke from his fellow candidates, but he had sense enough to take it all in good part. Big as he was, he knew there were too many involved in that laugh of ridicule for him to think of punishing them all.

"Call it lamb, can't you, ma'am?" he meekly suggested, with a languishing leer in his big eyes. "Call it lamb, an' my neck's all ready fer your collar!"

"Vhas you dake me vor a Shack Getch?" saucily retorted Gretchen, shrugging one plump shoulder toward the repentant digger most provokingly. "I vhasn't eafen a bolicemans, und I vhasn't ready to gollar you—rightt away now, anyhow!"

If there was a sting in her first sentences, there was balm in the ending; softly uttered, lingeringly pronounced, joined to a bright, coquettish glance that brought another flush to that massive face; not altogether of shame or mortification this time.

Dutch Dan lay for a few seconds like one stunned or bewildered by his unexpected fall, and when he did scramble to his feet, it was to see and hear Gretchen apparently taking his part; a fact so amazing that all thoughts of revenge seemed driven out of his mind for the time being. And staring at that bright, saucy face, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg silently resumed his place at the end of the line.

After that dazzling glance to disarm Dave Flint, Gretchen turned abruptly to her recreant lover, growing cold and merciless once more.

"I dinks me it vhas you dot my name spoken a leedle vhaile pack. I dinks me I hear you galf me your Gretchen—*nein*?"

"Vhas it de foorst time?" huskily muttered Dutch Dan, timidly lifting his gaze to meet hers.

"Maype so not; bud it vhas der last dime, Daniel Goodykoontz!"

"Uff it vhas all a mistake, Gretchen?" still more timidly.

"Dot vhas a mistake I makes me not dwo dimes oafar, anyvay," with a pert toss of her blonde head. "Dot vhas a mistake when I dinks you vhas a man shuck vull uff honor und lofe und goodheartds—*yes*! Dot vhas a mistake when I vorks me so hardt by nightt und by day vor gelt to bring you dot pig seas oafar to me—*yes*! Dot vhas a mistake, bigger as all der rest, when I makes me so mooch droobles by hunting you dis gountry oafar! I more goot sense shoven uff I puy me a tin monkey mit a a prass dail for a husbandt! Dot vhas so, Daniel Goodykoontz!"

Stunned, bewildered, by this voluble tirade, Dutch Dan stood with bowed head before the plump little virago, who only ceased when her breath failed her for the moment. Then, meekly almost tearfully the pilgrim muttered:

"You makes me wrong, Gretchen. Uff you vouldt only listen to me vor a leedle times I makes me dot all glear away again. I vould told you how I vhas—"

"You listen by me, Daniel Goodykoontz," sharply interjected the maiden, causing her rawhide to hiss through the air so near his nose that his head jerked back with an audible snap. "You dinks you make me a vool oudt like when I didn't know me so mooch as now—eh? Look you oafar dis line along; look you oafar all dose shendlemens; look you dem vaces und dose vigures close; und say by yourselluf dem von und all vhas ready to shump at dot boor girl you blayed dose dirdty dricks by—*yes*!"

"Ready, and only waiting for the word, little woman!" called out a natty little digger at the further end of the line.

"Riddy too, av ye bud spake the wurrud, ma'am, to make tailin's av that Dutch divil, so we be, now!" grimly nodded Teddy Malone.

Gretchen glanced from speaker to speaker, then turned again to Dutch Dan with sparkling eyes and mocking tones:

"You hear me dot, Daniel Goodykoontz? A line so long like a kite-dail, und any von vordt more as you den dimes oafar! Mark you dot down, und den see how pig a vool you may be vor eafen dinking I looks me some more py you as a lofer!"

Little by little Dutch Dan was gathering his courage, drawing himself more erect, looking more akin to the athlete who had overthrown Bully Baldwin but a short time earlier in the day. He no longer cowered before that quivering whip, those sparkling eyes, that mocking tongue. And there was more than doggedness in his voice as he uttered:

"You speak more drue as you dinks when you say you haf a mistake maken, Gretchen Stauffer. Bud shoost vhat sort uff mistake, you shoot vay off der mark!"

"I vhas a grazy vhimmens so vhell as a vool, den?" snapped Gretchen, making her rawhide tremble significantly by her side.

"I neffer say me so much as dot; I shoost say you vhas make a mistake, und I am ready to show you how dot come apoudt, Gretchen."

"Vhas it a mistake dot vhimmens I see mit you by Gasdle Garten?"

Dutch Dan gave a shivering shrug of his shoulders, but was prompt enough with his answer:

"Dot vhimmens vhas vorser as a mistake, my tear! She vhas grazy-mat vor a man, und she sthick me glose to vorse as a guckle-purr! Vhas I to drash a vhimmens, und my poosom so vull uff you like her, a vhimmens, bud so mooch more peautiful—my tear Gretchen Stauffer!"

Soft and gentle his tones now. Wistful, even loving his looks. And woman-like, Gretchen seemed to soften again.

"But vhy you roon away, den?"

"Dot vhas more easy sdill, my tear," promptly responded Dutch Dan. "I roon away dinking you vould voller me kvick, und so dot wicket vhimmens vouldn't make your vace scratch oop so badt—eh?"

"Und you vorgets to sthop rooning dis long? Bah!"

"Dot vhas a sdrange gountry, Gretchen, und when I vanted to stop, I didn't coul vintd myselluf! I vhas lost, und dot vhimmens vhas lost, und vorser by effer, *you* vhas lost, my leedle girl! Und neffer undil dis werry day vhas I able to vintd you some more—*nein*."

Gretchen gazed at the pilgrim intently, conflicting emotions plainly doing battle in her heart and brain. A woman does not readily forget the man she first learned to love, let him act as basely as he may, and he she never so great a coquette by nature. It was an audacious explanation he gave, but—might it not be true, after all?

"You roon a mighty long vays, Dan," she murmured, with a curious glitter suddenly filling her big blue eyes. "You roon mighty grookedt, und sthop not long by von blace at a dime, ain'dt it, Daniel?"

For a brief space the pilgrim seemed confused and at a loss how to extricate himself with credit; but he quickly rallied:

"Dot vhas bartly by peing in a sdrange gountry, Gretchen. I neffer know how to shpeak blain enough vor making dem mans oondersthand kvick my meaning uff, und so I goes me straight in a grooked line—see?"

"Drying to vintd me, Daniel?" softer, more coaxingly it seemed.

"Vhat else, mein ainsell? Didn't I know my Gretchen? Didn't I make me sure vich vay she go looken vor me? Didn't I know she come straight by dis Rough Ropin town? Vor sure I know me all dot! Und now, my leedle vhimmens, ve vill go—"

"How vhas dot I hear me you come dis vhay more as a dwo veeks in vrontt uff me? Oxblain me dose, Daniel, uff you please!"

"How vhas dot?" slowly, rubbing his peaked chin thoughtfully, but quickly brightening up once more as he hurriedly added: "How vhas dot, you vant to know, eh? Shoost so easy I oxblain me dose, my tear! I vhas not so mooch gelt haben, und it vhas sheaber to valk as to ride by dose stage goaches in; sheaber, und more slow. I knows me you by dose goach comen, und so to be here to velcome you, it makes me necessary dot I sthart me long dime aheadt—see?" with a triumphant smile on his gaunt, leathern visage.

Gretchen tossed her blonde head with a mocking laugh, casting aside the mask she had worn for the last few minutes for the sole purpose of making his humiliation complete.

"Uff you vhas von-half so goot a man as you vhas schmart liar, Daniel Goodykoontz, un ainsell vhas not bure enough to liff in de same gountry by you! I vhas no ainsell, bud I vhas neider a vool to dake all dot sthuff in like a zucker-vish—*nein*! You vhas no goot! You petter go shamboo dot headt mit a sand-glub, I dinks me! You vhas blayed out mit Gretchen Stauffer, und I'm going to look me out a handsomer mans—I vintd me blenty like dot rightt away dis growd in!"

"Shut up or be shut, Dutch!" cried a member of the group. "Don't bother the lady any more, or you'll think an earthquake crept down that red lane of yours when you fell asleep last time."

Stupefied, fallen-jawed, Dutch Dan watched Gretchen as she slowly moved along the line, casting roguish, coquettish glances into the face of each candidate as she passed, now and then pausing to utter a malicious comment that covered the subject with confusion and drew bursts of laughter from the rest in line.

But gradually a flush of hot rage colored his gaunt face, and he called out in surly tones:

"Dot vhas all rightt, Gretchen, uff you geep on so dinking when der endt gomes pack! Dot vhas all rightt! I go gits me trunk like a pig vhisly shug. I ask me dot vorst retlicker vor maken a man grazy-mat und running oafar mit vight. I vills me up mit dot boison so vull it pegin to run my dwo ears oudt! I gomes away, und asks me vhat mans dot Gretchen Stauffer shooses dis growdt oudt vor her lofer. I vintds him. I shumb him on dop uff like von grazy elevundt mit dwo dails! Dot vhas all. After dot, dere vhas nolding left to see but von leedle shot uff krese dot mans off!"

Gretchen paid not the slightest attention to this grim declaration of war, but continued her slow sauntering down the line, seemingly weighing each candidate in the balance of her fancy, but clearly in no haste to make a selection. Why should she be, with so many on a string?

Lee Kavanagh, himself in a position where he could both see and hear without attracting inconvenient attention, was through all this trying to settle the strange suspicions which had leaped into his mind at first sight of Daniel Goodykoontz. One moment he would feel sure, the next he would curl his lips in scorn at the ridiculous fancy.

At length he doggedly resolved that he would stick to the scent until his doubts were forever set at rest, for or against, and watching his chance, he caught the eye of English Sparrow, covertly beckoning him to approach. And just as he did so, turning on his heel to seek a more retired quarter, a vivid flash filled his eyes as they rested on the athletic figure of Tom Penny, approaching the spot.

He swiftly stepped into the nearest saloon, grasping English Sparrow by the arm and pointing out the advancing mine-manager as he said:

"Watch him! note how he acts and looks when he sees that Dutchman! Don't let him smoke you, but play your cunningest! Mark close: it may be of the deepest importance to our little game!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FIRM THROUGH ALL TEMPTATION.

"EVER—forever, Tom!" murmured Alcina, touching her lips to his before drawing back at

that cold, deliberate announcement of her father's return.

"Then I am strong enough to do what is right!"

Possibly Keefe Valder was more tender-hearted than he would have the mine-manager believe; possibly his mind had really turned back to the time when, as he said, he was once a lover himself; for he paused to vigorously clear his voice after rapping and before he turned the knob to open the door and enter.

But he might have spared himself all this trouble. Now that she knew what lay before them, Alcina was not ashamed for her parent to see wholly, how proudly she loved this man.

A flash of pleasure came into the face of the speculator as he saw the young couple standing together, Alcina clasping her white hands over the shoulder of her lover, leaning her head against his arm. Surely all was working well! Surely he had won, despite his misgivings!

"Bless you, my children!" he exclaimed, with a vague memory of a stage-scene witnessed many a year gone by, extending his hands and trying hard to make them tremble as he stalked forward: only to stop short as Tom Penny gravely uttered:

"Wait, Mr. Valder, there must be no more cause for misunderstandings between you and me. While I highly value your blessing, especially when coupled with your daughter's name, I cannot—"

"Bless my soul and body! what are you trying to get at, anyhow?"

He wishes to say that he has not altered his resolve in the least since you left the room, father; and I know he is right!" impulsively interpreted Alcina, clinging still closer to her lover.

A complete and disagreeable change came over the speculator at these words. All emotions vanished with his bland smiles. His jaws squared and took on a dogged, bullish look. His shaggy brows lowered and his jetty eyes filled with a peculiar reddish gleam.

"Do you confirm that statement, Mr. Penny?" he demanded, coldly.

The mine-manager hesitated, but it was not because he was in doubt whether to say yes or no: the form in which to convey his resolve was the prime difficulty with him just then. He knew that a storm must result, but he hoped to mitigate its severity by timely terms.

The wish is father to the thought, and brief as that hesitation was, Keefe Valder caught at it as a ray of hope remaining. It might not be too late, even now! And his manner showed how eager he was to catch at even the shadow of a chance.

"Do not be hasty—take time for thought, my dear fellow!" he uttered, sinking into a seat near the table, his fat hands fumbling nervously with the glasses. "Better a little delay than foolish haste! It is an important matter, you know! Your entire future happiness is at stake. And more—think of the little woman, Tom? Remember that while one word may bind her to you for life, another will part you as widely and eternally as the two poles! Remember that, my dear boy!"

Rapidly, feverishly came the words, following each other so closely that Tom Penny could not have checked their course had he made the effort. He made none. He was too greatly startled for that. And yet—from the very outset he had felt, what he now knew, that there was something crooked in this affair.

And yet, it came with a shock, this conviction. Though prepared for it, as far as long and troubled thought can prepare a man, the blow fell none the less heavily.

He knew that Keefe Valder was not a man to worry or agitate himself over a love affair, even though his daughter was involved. Bland and agreeable though he was in outward seeming, a more thoroughly selfish man never drew the breath of life. If no secret reasons moved him, he would never take all this trouble, never hesitate and parley like this; smiling blandly as ever he would part the lovers without an instant's grace. Then—what were his reasons for acting as he was acting now?

There must be something wrong with this claimed purchase of the Scottish Chief. Either that transfer and that note were forgeries, or else Gregor McGregor had in some manner been forced to yield them, against his free will!

All this flashed through the busy brain of the mine manager while Keefe Valder uttered those hurried sentences, and they lent him the required bluntness when the speculator came to a pause.

"I have thought; I have weighed the matter well, Mr. Valder," he said, gravely, as he gently removed those clinging arms from his shoulder, holding both Alcina's hands in his own as he added: "Heaven knows how sweet the temptation! Heaven knows how gladly I would yield to your wishes, could I do so without losing my own self-respect, without staining my honor!"

The flush faded from the full face, giving place to a sickly, angry pallor. Keefe Valder started as though to spring upon the speaker, but restrained himself by a violent effort of will, slowly uttering:

"You make a strange selection of words, Mr.

Penny. Will you kindly explain just what you mean, in as few words as possible?"

"What can I say more than I have? As the father of the woman I love with all my heart and soul, you should know how hard—how bitterly hard!—it is for me to antagonize you in this, Mr. Valder!"

"Then I am to understand that you still refuse to honor the instructions sent you by your late employer?" still more coldly.

"I am honoring them, though I try to hope the sign given me may have come through a mistake on his part," gravely replied Penny. "I try to believe Mr. McGregor made that sign, while intending to make the other. But until I know this for certain, I would be false to my trust were I to act on my hopes, instead of that plain evidence."

"And you decline to deliver up the property?"

"I must—until Mr. McGregor can be found to relieve me of my pledge."

"Of course you understand all that decision covers, Mr. Penny?"

"You are angry and offended, but what else can I do?" persisted the mine-manager, still clinging to his one faint hope. "It can only mean a brief delay, after all, and in the end you will come to look at my conduct differently from what you consider it now. I will send in search of Mr. McGregor to—"

"I have nothing to do with that," coldly interposed Keefe Valder, rising to his feet. "My business with Mr. McGregor ended when he took my money in exchange for the papers pertaining to the Scottish Chief property. With that interchange I lost all interest in him."

"But if a single word from his lips would clear up this wretched tangle, why not—"

"If a single breath from my lips could materialize Gregor McGregor, and place him before you and I, Thomas Penny, after what has been said and hinted this day, I would hold that breath back until I dropped a corpse before your eyes, rather than give it emission!"

Through all this, Alcina was looking from face to face, growing more troubled, less composed at each interchange of words. And now, unable to bear more, she tremblingly cried:

"Father—for my sake be kind! For my sake—I love him so very dearly! It will kill me to—"

She faltered, her voice choking as her parent made a stern gesture.

"It is for your sake, since you bear my name, child! By insinuation if not in actual terms, he has charged me with forgery if not with murder!"

Pale, agitated, the mine-manager protested hastily:

"You have sadly mistaken me, Mr. Valder!"

Frowning darkly the speculator retorted:

"At any rate, you shall not depart without fully understanding me, Thomas Penny. It may be a waste of breath, but you have been a welcome visitor to this house; I have treated you as a gentleman, so deeming you until my eyes were rudely opened. Stop!" with a stern emphasis as the mine-manager attempted to protest against his words. "I have listened to you patiently; it is your turn to listen to what I have to say before bidding you good-evening."

"I have borne with your thinly veiled insults, because I know that an open rupture would give pain to one who is very dear to my heart; to the only being whom I have to care and love and guard on earth!"

His voice grew husky, unsteady, and with a quick stride he reached the side of his pale, trembling daughter, drawing her back with him as he once more confronted the mine-manager, a plump hand warning him to keep his distance.

"Once more—for this poor, trembling child's sake! Once more, Thomas Penny, I bid you reflect well on your course of action! I never thought it would come to this; never dreamed that I would be temporizing so piteously with one whose conduct has—indirectly, if you prefer it thus—cast insult and obloquy on my name! And yet—even now it may be time to retrace your steps—even now you may redeem yourself, Tom!"

If acting, it was the perfection of art. There were tears in his voice, and moisture in his jetty eyes. And, half unconsciously, Alcina was strengthening his plea, though not a sound escaped her quivering lips. Wistfully, longingly she gazed into the pale face of the man whom she loved so wholly, so passionately. If it could only be! If this sore trial might be put aside!

It was a temptation such as seldom assails a man, and Thomas Penny felt it to his inmost heart. It was so easy to yield, with that note in his possession. It was so hard to resist, with that lovely face before him. Surely Gregor McGregor had unconsciously placed the wrong sign on his note of instructions!

If Keefe Valder had been content to wait, to let that great temptation work its own way, he might even then have won his point; but fancying he saw signs of yielding, he hurriedly struck what he believed a blow to turn the scales in his favor:

"Yield, and all is forgotten, Tom! Stand firm in your bull-headed obstinacy, and you sever every tie that has bound us together! You put my child away from you—for never child of mine shall join hands with a man who insults her father!"

He stopped short, biting his lips savagely as a change came over the face into which he was gazing. Tom Penny gave a shake, drawing his athletic figure erect, his jaws squared, his brown eyes glowing with stern resolution as he uttered:

"I trust you will think better of this, in time, Mr. Valder. As for me, I can simply perform what I sacredly believe is my duty."

Alcina bowed her head, hiding her face in her hands. Keefe Valder almost flung her into a chair, then faced the mine-manager, his face hotly flushed, his eyes aglow, his voice harsh and menacing:

"You have said it, Thomas Penny! You have deliberately chosen our enmity rather than our friendship, and though you were to grovel on your face in the dust at my feet, begging for pity, I would trample you under my feet as though you were a venomous reptile! You have elected war, and war it shall be between you and I—war to the knife, and the knife to its very hilt!"

"I shall only defend my trust, and strike but when duty compels me," gravely responded the mine-manager, his eyes turning toward the maiden whose sobs were silently shaking her beautiful figure.

Keefe Valder intercepted that look, and showed his teeth viciously.

"Ye may look, but it is for the last time at such close quarters, Tom Penny!" he laughed, harshly. "You have cast her off of your own free will, and from this hour you two are strangers to each other! Ay! dearly as I love her, I would sooner lay her dead at my feet with this good right hand, than see her aught to you—than see her become *your* bride! And now—go! Never let me see your face in this place again!"

With a gasping cry, Alcina sprang to her feet, evading the quick grasp of her parent, flinging herself upon the breast of her lover.

"My love—my heart—my soul!" she panted, reaching up and pressing her pale lips to his with passionate fervor.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING SUSPICION.

WITH an angry oath, Keefe Valder strode forward to tear his daughter away, only to retreat under a stern shove from Tom Penny's hand.

"Peace, sir!" sternly warned the mine-manager, his eyes aglow. "You shall not deny us this last parting word."

Either cowed, or still hoping against hope for a victory, Keefe Valder made no further attempt to interfere, standing by the table, one hand in his bosom on a pistol.

Gently Tom Penny lifted Alcina's head from his bosom where it had drooped, kissing her passionately, repeatedly, between his words:

"Be true to your faith, little woman, even as I am proving true to mine. Have faith, and all will be well in the end. Heaven is too kind to punish us for trying to do our duty. The clouds will pass, and our reunion will be all the more sweet for the delay. You will trust me?"

"As I trust in my God, dear Tom!" fervently exclaimed the maiden.

"Then—once more! Farewell, my life! God guard and bless you!"

Again their lips met in a long, clinging kiss. Then, without a look toward Keefe Valder, Tom Penny caught up his hat and left the house.

Like Lee Kavanagh had but a short time earlier in the day, Tom Penny strode on without knowing just whether his steps were leading him. Though he had so nobly resisted temptation, the victory had not been won without loss. He felt dazed, stunned, incapable of coherent thought.

Unfortunately he passed the turning which he would have taken had his brains remained as clear as usual, for he had no business to transact in town, even had he felt capable of attempting it in his present state of mind. Unconsciously he passed along the deserted streets, led by the touch of fate, it may be, direct to the spot where Dutch Dan was suffering the penalty of his past sins against love and truth.

It was the loud, jeering laugh which greeted the adroit tripping up of the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg by Dave Flint that broke the spell under which the mine-manager was laboring. He stopped short as he for the first time noticed the gathering, and for a brief space it seemed as though he would turn abruptly away, to seek rest and place for gloomy reflection at the Scottish Chief Mine.

That was his first impulse, and he could never determine just why he failed to act upon it. He certainly was in no mood for joining in a scene of merriment, such as this laughing crowd foreshadowed. Even when lightest-hearted, rude horse-play had scant charms for Tom Penny. And though a quick glance showed him the figures of many good and true well-wishers among the company, the same look showed him more

enemies; a greater number of those who sided with Lee Kavanagh in his attempt to take possession of the disputed mine.

Then Dutch Dan rose to his feet from his fall, and the eyes of the mine-manager rested squarely upon that gaunt, peculiar face.

Tom Penny started forward impulsively, only to pause again, brushing a hand rapidly across his eyes like one who fancies his vision has suddenly become distorted, whose brain is playing him some mad trick.

"Is it—can it be—am I going crazy?" he muttered, again and yet again trying to clear his glowing, astonished eyes.

Hardly conscious of the fact, he slowly moved nearer the spot, his eager, wondering, doubting gaze riveted on the face of Dutch Dan, a wild suspicion struggling in his confused brain. That face was so like—and yet—was it?

Just as Lee Kavanagh had struggled between doubt and belief, so Tom Penny mentally swayed back and forth, trying vainly to solve the puzzling enigma to his own satisfaction.

Unconscious of the keen, interested eyes which were watching his every movement, noting each change of countenance, the mine-manager came still nearer the scene, intent only on proving his suspicion true, or else discovering the curious deception beyond possible doubt.

A number of the company noticed and nodded to him, but Tom Penny saw them not, just then. He had eyes only for Dutch Dan—only for this uncouthly garbed figure whose face so marvelously resembled that of the man of all men whom he longed to meet just then; the face of Gregor McGregor!

"If it is he, why is he here in this guise? What part is he playing, and what object can he have in so disguising himself?"

That was part of the perplexing enigma, but Tom Penny, his brain rapidly clearing, his wits collecting once more, dared not openly attempt to solve those doubts. If this was indeed Gregor McGregor in disguise, he was trying to avoid recognition. If that, then he must feel assured of peril in his own proper person.

Gretchen Stauffer paid no attention to the grim threats of her old-time lover, leisurely moving along the line of matrimonial candidates, full of coquettish arts, flavoring even her sly gibes with honey.

She stopped at the end of the line, glancing slowly back with her fair brows wrinkled, a perplexed expression on her face, not unlike that which a child will wear when troubled with having to choose one toy out of a score, each one of which has its peculiar charms.

"Dot vhas too plenty riches, shendlemens," she murmured, her head leaning toward one shoulder, her white teeth nibbling at a plump finger. "Uff it vhas only *von*, or *dwo*, or *dree* eafen! Bud so many—und each *von* so nice looken like dose! So many—und a vhimmens couldt haf but *von* choice! Dot vhas der droobles mit Gretchen!"

"Bedad O'I'll foight the pick av the gang, an' the bist mon takes the ledly!" pugnaciously cried Teddy Malone, leaping out of line, his heels clicking sharply together as he leaped into the air, rolling up his sleeves as though ready for work instant.

"*Nein—nein!*" cried Gretchen, swiftly interposing. "I vhas take me no vighter like dot! I vhas haf no husbandt mit a blue-plack eyes in his vace—not! Vhas I a growmeoh to bestuck oop like dot to make a brize vight oafar? Vhas I—*nein!* my goot shendlemens! Radder as dot, I dakes me back dot Yarmany man, Daniel Goodykoontz!"

"Gretchen, I vhas ready so kvick my headt go schwimmen!" cried Dutch Dan, forging forward, only to stop short with a snort of astounded disgust as that ready rawhide hissed viciously before his face.

"You vhas ready, but not *me*, oldt veller!" mocked the virago, with a saucy up-tilting of her nose. "Dot vater dot basses dose mill-vheels by, neffer more makes goot vlour; und dot mans who vhasn't sense enough to bick oop a goot ding when it runs his vide oben arms in, vhasn't a mans dot Gretchen Stauffer gatches—*nein!*"

"Go bag your head, Dutchy, and give hand-somer men a shake, can't ye?" laughed Dave Flint, adding in meeker tones: "Try my arms a whack, Miss Gretchen—do! If you was a bit o' sunshine, I'd never lose my grip until the gospel-sharp had time to cement us forever amen!"

Once more Gretchen cast a fleeting glance along the line, but then shook her head with mischievous gravity as she murmured:

"You vhas all so nice und schweet und bretty und lofeable, dot I know I makes me sorry uff I bicks any *von* oudt der resdt vrom rightt away in a hoory now! Und so—I makes me a goot long schleeb oafar dot madder. I vait a leedle, und bick me oudt a mans when I haf more dime vor dinking it oafar—no!"

"But if we grow too impatient, Miss Gretchen?" persisted Flint, fully as much in earnest as he was in jest. "If we grow jealous of each other, an' fall to cuttin' throats—what then?"

Gretchen flung back her head, with a curling lip as she replied:

"Dot make my bick come easier, by each vight durning dwo mans oudt der ranks vor goot! I likes me no vighters. I do dot vigh-ting vor der whole vamily my own self—see?"

During this interval, Lee Kavanagh was not idle. He watched Tom Penny closely, and saw enough to feel sure the mine-manager entertained much the same suspicions that had troubled him at the sight of Dutch Dan. Still, he saw that Penny was dubious, after all, and in order to give him a fair chance to unmask the pilgrim, supposing he really were one, Kavanagh sent English Sparrow around with a hint that warned his adherents this gathering must be broken up in short order.

The adroit little rascal performed his duty without attracting attention from other than the ones in the alliance, and when Gretchen at length reached her decision to "sleep on the matter," the majority of the crowd made no objection, melting quietly away.

Gretchen only paused to give Dutch Dan one more scornful glance, checking his step toward her with a flourish of her rawhide, then running lightly away in the direction of the hotel at which she had put up on coming to Rough Robin.

The Pilgrim from Spitzenberg seemed inclined to follow after her, when he was checked by Tom Penny stepping directly before him, his eyes glowing vividly as they met the Dutchman's hot glance. But a shiver of vague disappointment swept over him as he read nothing in those blue eyes save a sullen anger and suspicion commingled.

"Vhat vor you sthopp my roadt, *hein?*" he growled, scowling blackly, but giving no signs of recognition. "Moost I run you oafar like a vool goose-ganter dot don't got sense to git my my vay oudt?"

Tom Penny stepped aside, mechanically casting a quick glance about them as though he felt curious eyes watching his actions. Eyes were upon him, but the man who directed them was cunning to keep hidden from view just then.

Brief as was the delay, it gave Gretchen time to disappear from view, and Dutch Dan muttered an oath in German under his breath as he vainly looked about in quest of the maiden.

He started forward to the corner around which she had disappeared, only to be again disappointed, and as he came to a pause, Tom Penny overtook him, his face firm, his eyes bright, his present course fully decided upon.

Dutch Dan wheeled sharply as a light touch brushed his shoulder, and there was something of curiosity mingling with the dull anger that smoldered in his blue eyes when they rested on the mine-manager.

"Dot vhas you some more, hey?" he frowned.

"Begging your pardon, of course, my dear sir," blandly responded Penny, bowing slightly; then adding abruptly as he drew a bit of paper from his breast, unfolding it and holding it fairly before the face of the pilgrim, whose looks had awakened such a strange, wild suspicion in his mind: "May I ask you to look over this bit of writing? Can you tell me who wrote it?"

Dutch Dan stared stupidly into his face for a few moments, then glanced at the paper, his head turning a little to one side, just as we see a child act when puzzled by something shown him.

"Vhat makes dose, my goot friendt?" he ventured, shooting a keen, fleeting glance into the handsome face beyond the paper.

"It's not loaded, I assure you, sir," forcing a laugh. "I simply wish to discover the author of this bit of writing. *Did you do it?*"

Sharp and abrupt came the last sentence, and keenly the mine-manager watched the face before him, feeling sure that were his suspicions well founded, some token must be discovered there then.

If Dutch Dan was playing a part, he proved himself letter perfect. There was nothing save a dull doubt, a sort of sulky suspicion which an ignorant man is apt to display when brought face to face with something which he fails to understand. He refused to touch the paper, though he looked at it closely enough, and much longer than was necessary for even a poor scholar to read the few lines.

"I makes me noddink oudt foon dot, my goot friendt," he muttered at length, glancing up with an owl's shake of his head. "It vhas not like ve write oafar in Yarmany, I dinks me—*nein!*"

"It is English; and you—you are a stranger! You are sure you do not recognize me? You have nothing to say to me, even?"

Dutch Dan fell abruptly back a pace, his big fists doubling up belligerently, his vague suspicions flaming up with renewed force.

"Vhas I know you? Vhas I noddinks to say by you? Ha!" with a deepening scowl and vicious showing of his teeth. "You vhas *von* uff dem nice vellers vhat Gretchen makes lofe undo, aindt it? You vhas shumb my pack ub vor a lickings, maype? Vhell, I vhas your zar-deen!"

CHAPTER XV.

IS THE PILGRIM A STRANGER?

And to put his meaning beyond all possibility

of doubt, Dutch Dan pulled his bullet-pierced cap further on his head, spat into his hands and brought them into position for either dealing or warding off a blow.

"Maype I vhas dot grazy-mat vool she gall me, bud I vhas pig a-blendy vor licking dwo vellers like you, my goot friendt! Not vwhile Daniel Goodykoontz keels alive vos any oder mans my gell haben!"

"Bless your soul, man, I wouldn't take Gretchen as a gift!" laughed Tom Penny holding up one hand in deprecatory fashion, those wild suspicions vanishing like a fog wreath before a strong gust of wind.

Surely there was no acting in this pugnacious conduct! Surely the stranger *was* a stranger!

Dutch Dan partly lowered his hands; but still frowning blackly on this handsome young fellow whose other hand was restoring that bit of writing to its former place of hiding in his breast.

"You wouldn't haben Gretchen—you vhas dinking she vashn't vort somooch? Py cracious! she vhas blendy petter as *you*, onyhow!"

For a brief space it really seemed as though the pugnacious pilgrim would assault the other for declining Gretchen!

"Call it too good for me, then," lightly added Tom Penny, growing half impatient with himself for losing so much time over a vain fancy as it seemed to him now. "And, then, I wasn't in the ring. I just came up as the circus ended. But if you're spoiling for a fight, no doubt you can find plenty of men in town to accommodate you."

"It vhas my Gretchen I vhasnt me foorst," muttered Dutch Dan, with a regretful look coming into his face as he glanced about in vain quest of that charming creature. "Uff she makes friendts by me, I vhas so dame und shendle like a sheep-lamb dots schleepen. Bud uff not—uff I gatch me her vinking by dose vool vellers!—den I vhas splatter plood dis down all oafar! I vhas gittink me grazy-mat bretty soon! Und when I dakes me dot vay I vhas a bolar pear mit a green eye, und shuck vull uff hygrophobiousness!"

Tom Penny had half turned to depart, when that wild suspicion returned with doubled force. Dutch Dan was fiercely gesticulating, but among his gyrations the mine-manager fancied he caught a signal to pause; and right or wrong, once more he felt that this pilgrim was no stranger!

Dutch Dan apparently saw nothing of this, for he turned on his heel and strode back to where his dusty pack still lay on the ground where he had abandoned it to confront the crowd whose voices were being raised so threateningly. He dropped down beside it, tearing off his clumsy wooden shoes, to substitute for them the leather brogans, muttering and growling to himself as he labored thus.

And then he groped around until he found his precious pipe and its divorced stem, fitting them together and filling the bowl with tobacco, seeming to find a sad comfort in the action. And as he struck a match with which to light the fragrant weed, his frown gradually grew lighter until, with the blue fumes streaming through his nostrils, he changed from rage to sorrow.

Never had Tom Penny been so thoroughly puzzled as in this case. The features, the figure, the general appearance all fitted his recollection of his employer almost perfectly. He still believed he had caught a signal from those wildly gyrating hands, and in that belief he had followed after the pilgrim, now standing and watching him, lost to all else for the time being.

"You vhas make yecurselluf shuck ub mit grief, Gretchen, when you see dot lofer schwal-lered ub in his plood! You vhas sorry vor all vhen dot ghost foon Daniel Goodykoontz gemes your pedzide py und croan in bees misery so loudt! You vhas hef to veer grape vhen you marry mit some uff dose tam vools—*neffer*, py shings! I go vill me oop dot vorst vigh-ting vshisky mit, und glean dot whole down oudt! I git so droonk like a vried owl! I schallenge dot growd, und valls me in a bile uff slam mans deadt! I makes me—*Hello!*"

Tom Penny stepped forward and touched him on the arm. Dutch Dan turned, scowling, to force a smile as he recognized the man who had once before addressed him.

"My good friend," said Penny, in clear, distinct tones, now fully aware that his actions were being closely observed by more than one pair of eyes, the owners of which had no particular love for him. "I am sorry to see you like this, and I wish you would trust yourself with me for a little time. You are a stranger here, and hardly used to our rough and ready manner of action."

Dutch Dan gave a vigorous nod and side twist of his head.

"Uff I vhas a sdranger *now*, blendy beebles know me like notting der morning by! I vhas vorking me my grazy-mat up, und burty-zoon dem vellers dinks dey see un army-vul uff leedle ainsbells shumbing dot vball oafar! Und each *von* dem ainsbells garry a glub long as a dree! Und effery gromeoh hef a kilt vrame on its oudsite! *Dot's so!*"

"And before the night is half-gone, Gretchen will be a widow before she is a wife; think of

that, my good friend," gravely added Tom Penny, more than ever determined to get this pilgrim where he could fairly determine whether or no his suspicions were well founded, without having his movements so closely watched as they seemed to be now.

Apparently he touched the right chord. At mention of Gretchen, Dutch Dan suddenly grew calmer, his head drooping, his smoke-puffs coming in swift yet irregular succession. And then he muttered:

"Dot vhas somdink hef indo it! Petter I go me avay and lose myselluf by dem vildernesses! Petter I makes me von ploody gorpse as to make droobles like dot on Gretchen!"

Tom Penny was quick to improve the opening thus presented.

"You saw how Gretchen refused to make a choice from those rascals when the chance was given? You saw how she bluffed them off? Why did she do it? Let me tell you what I think, my good fellow. I believe at the very last moment her heart failed her. I believe that if you give her a little time to think the matter over, she will fall into your arms, too happy for seeking you for your past mistakes!"

"Uff I couldt dinks me dot vay!" muttered Dutch Dan, uplifting his eyes to heaven with a groaning sigh that seemed to come from the very bottom of his lungs.

"Give it a trial, anyway," urged Penny, still talking more for the benefit of those watchful enemies than because he believed in the remedy he was advocating, or that this stranger was what he pretended. "I live a little way out of town, and am on my way there now. Come with me, and take a fresh start in the morning."

"Uff I couldt lick a vist-ful uff dem vheilers before dot?" hesitated the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg. "Uff I go me off, dey say I vhas bull outt vor a gowart 'fraidt, maype?"

"Take your choice," a little sharply retorted Penny, with a frown as his doubts returned with provoking force; so perfect was this acting—if acting it was! "All I have to add is this: there's a mighty tough gang in Rough Robin, and the worst of all were among the men in this little circus. I don't say you couldn't get away with the best in the boodle with a fair shake, but would you get that? Not any! You'd run up against a knife-point, or trip on a blue pill, first off!"

"I vhas somedinks uff a vighter myselluf!"

"So much the worse for you," bluntly. "But I'm not crowding you. For the sake of that little woman, I'm willing to give you a shake-down for the night, but if you won't have it that way, good-night!"

It had come to this point, though Tom Penny, having lost so much time in moody thought, could hardly realize where the afternoon had gone to. The sun had set for some little time, and the shades of night were rapidly falling over the town.

It was partly this—knowing that he had many enemies to guard against since coming in opposition with Lee Kavanagh—that caused the mine-manager to cut the interview short; but it was almost as much his growing doubts. It was strange, but true, just as it had been with Lee Kavanagh before him, that one minute Tom Penny was almost positive this strange being was Gregor McGregor in cunning disguise, only to feel that he was making an idiot of himself in doubting for a moment that Dutch Dan was anything more than Dutch Dan!

He started to leave the spot, when the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg strode alongside with the decision:

"I go me 'long, den! I gif dose vheilers von more night to lif. I gif Gretchen dot shance you dalks apoudt. Und look you by vhat I dells you now, my goot friendt!" catching Penny by the arm, swinging in front of him with eyes aglow and voice full of earnestness. "Uff it vhas durn outt dot vhay: uff I gits me my Gretchen pack vonce more; uff sho my vrow pegomes: I makes you my bromise ve name our foorst leedle kinter after you—*py shings!*"

Tom Penny could not help laughing, though he felt in anything but a jovial mood, just then. Once more his belief that this was Gregor McGregor in disguise was put to flight by that quaint earnestness.

Dutch Dan seemed satisfied with the effect his vow had produced, however, and they walked on in silence through the rapidly increasing gloom, soon clearing the town and taking the trail that led to the Scottish Chief.

If it appears strange that Tom Penny should be so reluctant to abandon that wild suspicion, let it be borne in mind how much rested on his shoulders. He was placed in charge of a rich property, which was now in dispute. To prevent its being taken possession of by force of arms, he had closed the workings, and even fortified the premises. This he had done on his own judgment, though promptly sending word by mail of the brewing trouble. As yet no answer had come. And now Keefe Valder returned with what, on its face, appeared full power to take possession.

Only for that secret sign! For he was almost convinced that the writing and the signature were genuine enough. If Gregor McGregor would only put in an appearance, to relieve him

of this unequal struggle; a struggle in which he had to fight his own heart as well as his own enemies.

Bearing this in mind, and remembering that the stranger wore the very face, the figure even, of his employer, was it so strange that Tom Penny refused to listen to reason when it whispered his folly?

Leaving the town behind them, the twain strode briskly enough along the trail leading to the mine, Dutch Dan talking freely over his past and the present, with an occasional flight into the future.

He was free to admit that it was a curious conversion in his heart. He admitted running away from Gretchen after her money paid his passage from Germany, frightened by her wild anger when she caught him in company with another woman, a fellow-passenger.

"Dot skeered me plue in der vace, my goot friendt! I dinks me uff a vhimmens vhas like dot befoore she git marriedt, vhat vhas she becomen when dot honey all leaks der moon outt? Und so—und so I roons me avay like a vrightened duck vlying!"

"A coople dimes I vindt her boonting me, und each dime a vhip vhas her visit insite! Und den I coomes me dis blace when I gits lost. Und Gretchen she shumbs me on when I didn't know it. Und I vhas so badt vrightened py myselluf dot I lie me kvick und say I neffer know who she vhas. Und den dem vool vheilers dalk Gretchen py der notion she vinds blendy petter looking mans! Und—und—"

"And when you found others wanting her, your love returned, of course," laughed Tom Penny, though still trying to decide that haunting doubt. "A very interesting story, but—is it true? Are you really Daniel Goodykoontz, or are you Gregor McGregor? On your life, man, tell me the plain truth! You are McGregor—I know it!"

Strongly agitated, the mine-manager caught the pilgrim by the arm and bent forward to see his face more clearly. But just then, before he could gain his ends, and before Dutch Dan could make reply, a sharp, menacing cry came from the wayside, and a number of dark figures leaped out upon the twain!

CHAPTER XVI.

LEE KAVANAGH SAYS NOT.

FROM his place in the saloon, Lee Kavanagh closely watched the approach of Tom Penny, and his white teeth came together with a vicious click as he saw him start with amazement, his wide-opened eyes fixed on the face of Dutch Dan.

"He sees what I saw!" the fellow grated savagely, his right hand gripping the butt of a deringer. "I was not deceived—it is the fellow himself! But how came he here, and in that rig? Devil grill those scoundrels alive! how has it all come about?"

He made no attempt to answer his own question just then, but bent all his wits to watching the curiously-changing face of his rival. He scowled blackly as he saw that Tom Penny was changing his belief. His lips curled back and his jetty eyes glittered and glowed as he saw the first suspicion fighting its way back to renewed life. It was a strangely-interesting vigil that he kept during that half-hour.

And it was not the least curious part of the whole, that, though he would rather have seen the foul fiend himself in Rough Robin than the man whose face Dutch Dan bore, when he first noticed him, now that he saw the same suspicion had assailed Tommy Penny, he wanted that suspicion fully confirmed.

"If it is the slippery rascal, why not make the most of the chance—why not call the turn on my own hook?" he thought, with a grim laugh dying in his throat.

Not a move on the part of his rival escaped him, and when the proper time arrived, he sent English Sparrow to scatter his men, planning to leave the way clear for the mine-manager to still further develop the little game. And with the little rascal in his company, he slipped out of close range, though still lingering where he could keep an eye on the two men.

"You've hit on heap bigger game than you thought, Sparrow!" he muttered in guarded tones.

"Hit was honly ha bit hof a joke, cap'n," meekly muttered the little villain, shifting uneasily from one foot to another; for of all men, English Sparrow held Lee Kavanagh in holy dread.

"A joke that will turn out grim earnest, I'm betting!" with a hard and ugly laugh that caused the shadow to shrink still further back.

Despite his keen watch on Tom Penny and Dutch Dan, this movement did not escape the notice of Lee Kavanagh; few things ever escaped him, for that matter; and he hastened to add:

"You'll be no loser for your part, Sparrow, if you play a clean hand to the end of the deal. How did you pick that fellow up? But never mind that, just now," with a hasty correction. "Time's precious, unless I'm 'way off my nut! Only—did you ever see him before?"

"Never—so 'elp me!"

"Bah!" with a short, ugly laugh and black scowl. "My wits are all befuddled over that infernal face. You never saw him; I remember that. You've heard of him, though! And unless we can put the nippers on him before another sun, I reckon you'll be among those who'll hear from him, too!"

English Sparrow fidgeted nervously, covertly scanning that darkly handsome face as though trying to learn from it what he dared not seek by open questioning. All he saw was a strange mingling of hatred, triumph and scowling doubt.

"How he came here, passes me! How the boys let him slip their grip is more than I can understand! Curse them from crown to sole! I'll make them sweat for their infernal carelessness before another day rolls by! Why, only for my chance stumbling on the fellow when he was off his guard for an instant, he might have fooled even my eyes!"

A glimmer of the truth broke upon the bewildered shadow, and it was so startling that he forgot his awe sufficiently to gasp:

"Not 'im—not the old cove w'at you—"

"No less than that, Sparrow," with another of those ugly laughs. "The old Scotchman himself! Fooled the boys, and come down here in cunning disguise to see for himself how that devil of a Tom Penny was holding out!"

"Hif H'I'd honly known hit was 'im!" gasped English Sparrow, with a spasmodic click of his rat-like teeth. "Hif H'I'd honly smoked 'im when 'e popped hup hin the trail down yonder—wouldn't H'I, though?"

A significant gesture supplemented the words, but Lee Kavanagh turned on him with an ugly snarl, grating:

"If you had, a thousand deaths wouldn't have begun to pay for your mistake, you whelp! Dead, he wouldn't be worth the prize of soap-grease to us! Keep that well in mind, will you? And now listen to me:

"Tom Penny has smoked the old codger, and ten to one they'll leave town together for the mine. You know the trail they must take to get there, and you must pick up half a dozen—take all you like, for that matter; just so you don't waste too much time in pulling out. Take your men and lay low in a snug place along the trail, and when they come by, jump them!"

"You don't want 'im slugged for keeps, then?" ventured English Sparrow as Lee Kavanagh broke off short to watch the actions of Tom Penny and the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.

"If he should creak, you'd better slit your own throat before you come back to tell me the news!" snarled Kavanagh with a venomous look. "Jump them: take them both, if the old man is along; but take them alive or I'll scorch every imp of your gang!"

"Hit's orders, band they'll be carried out hif we kin do hit, cap'n, be sure. But hif hit's so himportant, hit's best to 'ave beverything plain before makin' ha start. Hif the hold man don't come with Tom Penny, must we rake 'im in, hanyway?"

"Net if Tom Penny is alone. Let the rascal pass, and don't make a move that can possibly tell him you're on the lookout. But he won't be alone," with a low snarling laugh as he saw the two men once more together, near the spot where Dutch Dan had temporarily dropped his pack. "They're growing thick as two thieves already, and if that Dutch Dan as he calls himself isn't our game, Tom Penny is mightily fooled, too!"

It seemed as though Lee Kavanagh was on the point of adding more, when he gave a start as though struck an actual blow. His black eyes opened widely, then filled with a light that was fairly devilish in its intensity. His hands clinched tightly, and the breath came in audible streams through his dilating nostrils.

English Sparrow shrank back involuntarily, and the sound his feet made seemed to recall Lee Kavanagh to himself. He forced a hard laugh, then spoke rapidly:

"You know what you have to do, and there's little time to cut to waste. Get your men—take enough to make easy and sure work of the pair; and both of them are fighters, mind ye, if you give them half a chance! Jump them unawares—it will be plenty dark enough to cover you until you are fairly on their backs! Take them both alive, and hold them in a snug spot back from the trail while you bring me word of your luck. Skin out! And mind—alive!"

English Sparrow nodded vigorously, then stole away, eager to get out of such dangerous company. Always dangerous, even to those whom he called his friends; but this evening Lee Kavanagh appeared tenfold as venomous.

The dark schemer kept a close watch upon the couple, at the same time keeping himself well covered, and acting so that, if seen by any others, his actions would not be apt to arouse unwelcome curiosity. And as he watched, he gradually molded that startling idea into shape.

"Why not?" he mentally argued. "It hit me like a blow in the face from a heavy fist, but why can't it be done if all else hangs fire? If this fellow is really what he seems on the face of it—if he isn't the old devil broke loose—what's

to hinder my ringing him in as the original Jacobs?"

It was a wild, reckless fancy, but Lee Kavanagh was playing a desperate game just then. He still believed that Dutch Dan was Gregor McGregor in disguise, and he acted on that supposition. Still, if this was to prove all a mistake—nothing more than a curious resemblance of face and figure—why not turn it to good account?

"The old scoundrel was playing us dirt, even while we fancied he had knuckled down, it seems. He may hold out against all our persuasions, and the loss of each day only throws us that far behind. If we can ring in a double, why not?"

Lee Kavanagh watched Tom Penny and Dutch Dan as they started out of town, and even followed them a short distance beyond the limits, making sure they were going in the direction of the Scottish Chief, then he turned back to cover his tracks.

"Old Ridge Tanner'll kick up the devil's delight when his pet fails to show up, and naturally he'll look in my direction for an answer," the cunning schemer laughed, as he moved along. "Let him shoot off his mouth, but that's all the good it'll do him! I'm going to have a first-chop *alibi* ready for use. There were enough saw the fellow leave town, foot-free; and there'll be plenty to take oath that I was well inside the limits all the time!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PILGRIM ON HIS MUSCLE.

JUST one clear, sharp cry as a signal from one side of the trail to the ruffians lying in wait directly opposite, then English Sparrow broke the ambush which he had formed in obedience to the orders of Lee Kavanagh.

The spot was one favorable to their plans, and success seemed assured before a single move was made. The stars gave barely light enough, down in that rocky valley, to allow them to distinguish the figures of their game, and feeling confident that a single rush would suffice to crush the twain down in helplessness, that rush was made.

"Alive—mind that!" cried a sharp voice; not that of English Sparrow, who knew his accent would assuredly betray him even in that moment of excitement.

Neither Tom Penny nor Dutch Dan could possibly have anticipated such an attack, yet they met it as promptly and bravely as though they had come into that contracting pass fully prepared to fight for their liberty if not their lives.

For a single breath it looked as though the two men must go down before that first rush, but then there was a strange scattering of the confused mass, and the voice of Dutch Dan came pantingly, in broken jets like steam issuing from an exhaust pipe:

"Py shings! Dot vhas a—duyfil uff a blace! Look me leedle out—you vhasdep my does ondo! Now I vhas mat!"

And so it really seemed, for the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg performed wonders and marvels in the way of sturdy fighting from that moment on, his heavy fists thumping harshly against head or body, and his feet playing a scarcely less prominent part in the confused fracas.

And Tom Penny quickly rallied from the surprise, laying about him with fierce energy the instant he could clear his limbs sufficiently from those ugly grips to do so. And even then, with death apparently staring him in the face, he was conscious that he owed his ability to fight for freedom almost solely to Dutch Dan; even then he marveled at the enormous strength and cool courage through which the pilgrim managed to extricate them both from instant defeat and capture.

"Mind what the boss said!" howled English Sparrow, even then having cool cunning enough to select words which would not betray him through the use or misuse of that unlucky aspirate. "No killing! No tools but your fists or clubs!"

There was more than a warning to his own men in this. If he could impress on the two men assailed that their lives were in no immediate peril, they would not be so apt to call their own weapons in play, now that they had escaped immediate capture. Thus the cunning rascal reasoned, but without his best.

Marvelously well though the Pilgrim of Spitzenberg fought—and each stroke of his bony fists left a mark not easily to be got rid of—powerful though he himself was, Tom Penny could see that their capture was but a question of time, unless they could bring sterner help to aid their muscles. And so, striking down a burly ruffian who was clinging to his legs, the mine-manager drew a revolver and a moment later the confused scene was lit up by a red flash of burning powder.

"Back, you devils!" he panted, fiercely. "Dead if must be—never alive!"

"Go pack, you duyfils!" echoed Dutch Dan, laying about him like an animated thrashing-machine broke loose from all control. "You vhas vool yoursellufs when you dry to make droobles mit dis growdt! Ve vhas dwin vhal-russes mit sixteen dushes in each shawl! Eh? You don't vhas got blendy yit! Dells me dot now, vill you—nein?"

And as he grated forth the words, his mighty fist sent an obstinate tough reeling back against the rock wall, blinded, his senses reeling.

"I vhas a plue tog mit a yaller vagon! I didn't vhas no sheed uff vlybaber, my goot friends!"

Swiftly Tom Penny worked his pistol, the red glare lighting up the swaying mass and seeming to cast it into still greater confusion. He had no time to take aim, and his bullets sped wildly, but more than one fierce curse or sharp cry told that all the lead was not wasted. And though English Sparrow, forgetting his caution in the wild excitement, howled and screamed and exhorted his men to crush the rascals down, but not to harm them in wind or limb, this only served to still further demoralize the gang. If they dared to use their weapons, the affair would have been quickly ended.

And then, just in the nick of time, a loud, angry roar came to their ears from a short distance up the pass.

"Stick to 'em, lad! Down the dirty whelps, men! Rush 'em—sweep 'em clear o' the boss, then shoot to kill!"

More than one of the struggling men recognized that sturdy voice, and while it carried terror to some, it brought hope and life back to the young mine-manager.

"Rush 'em, Tanner!" he panted, with a tremendous effort clearing himself of enemies and pushing his way to the side of Dutch Dan. "I've got a friend—don't mistake!"

English Sparrow saw that his hopes were worse than vain, now, and shrilly sounded a signal for flight before taking to his nimble heels.

"Don't be sooch a hurry in, vellers!" panted Dutch Dan, as the ruffians tore away at break-neck speed, forgetting all save love of life. "Vait a leedle! Dot vun vhas shoost beginnig to pulble oop in—"

Tom Penny sprung against his breast, pushing him rapidly back to the wall, just in time to keep from being run down by the squad under command of Ridge Tanner as that worthy came bounding to the rescue.

"Sing out, boss!" the faithful old fellow howled, anxiously. "Sing out so we'll know who to down!"

"Here we are, safe and sound!" cried Tom Penny, then hastily adding, as his men were on the point of rushing by with savage cheers: "Hold hard all! Not a shot, on your lives!"

"But the cussed imps'll git clear off!" blurted out Tanner.

"The man that fires a shot is my bitter enemy," cried Penny, as he sprung before the bewildered rescuers. "Shoot, and you'll have to settle with me for it, I tell you, one and all!"

Brief as the check was, it enabled the ruffians to gain the shadows and vanish from view: all save a couple of groaning wretches lying on the blood-sprinkled ground where the fight had been most desperate.

"Orders is orders, an' halt she am!" acquiesced Ridge Tanner, though with plain reluctance. "It's mighty little fun fer a monstrous heap o' runnin', but ef you say so, boss—"

"I do say so," more calmly interposed the mine-manager. "We can't afford to do more than act on the defensive; you'll be the first to see that, old man, when you look at the matter coolly."

"Und I guess me dem vellers didn't hef so mooch more run as ve didt, oonyhow!" chuckled Dutch Dan, brushing a hand across his damp brow, leaning comfortably back against the rock wall. "I dinks I hears me couble or dwo schambs croanink like dem vhas der pellyache haben!"

"An' who mought you be?" bluntly growled Ridge Tanner, bristling up in hopes of having at least a slight taste of sport. "Sing out in a holy hurry ef you don't want me climbin' all over the back o' ye!"

"Yoost a Dutchman, my goot friendt, und—"

"My friend, and only for him you would have come too late to be of any service to me, daddy!" cried Tom Penny, stepping between the pair, a curious tremor in his voice as he spoke: "Only for him, they would have downed me, sure! And you," turning to Dutch Dan, grasping his hand, and shaking it warmly, "I'll try to thank you better when we have more time to spare."

"Neffer you porrow droobles py me, my goot friendt," laughed the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg. "Id vhas all right. I hef me soom foen. I vhas shoost somelinks like dot to vork dem low sbirds away my stomach vrom. I dinks I gan me go sound schleepen afder dot!"

Tom Penny stood irresolute for a moment, seemingly trying to pick and choose his words, when an interruption came from one of his men.

"We've got two o' the p'izen critters, boss. They're makin' a monstrous sight o' groanin' an' takin' on, but I don't reckon they're too bad hurt fer to look purty at the lower end of a rope—ef so be you'll be kind enough fer to let us make a trial!"

Tom Penny hurried over to where the two wretches were held captive, striking a match and passing the yellow flame close before their faces, keenly scrutinizing them. A short, hard laugh parted his lips as he dropped the glowing bit of wood.

"Just as I thought! Lee Kavanagh had a finger in this pie!"

"An' we kin run these two pills up a limb, boss?" coaxingly added the miner. "It'll help make up for the fun we lost by not gittin' here a leetle sooner, ye see!" with a half laugh.

If Tom Penny hesitated, it was not because he was bloodthirsty. He was not weighing the expediency of hanging, but trying to decide how he had best dispose of the rascals.

"Time enough for hemp-pulling, Sanders, when we can't put the rascals to a better use. Confiscate their tools, and bring them along to the mine. I've got an idea that may pan out richer than hanging the varlets up to dry in the night air."

There was no audible grumbling, though it was plain enough that his men were disappointed in not being permitted to string the ruffians up out of hand. Tom Penny was master in every sense of the term, and when he spoke in decided fashion, as he did now, there was nothing for it but to carry out instructions.

Only these two roughs were found, and on closer inspection they proved to be only moderately hurt; one with a flesh wound from Tom Penny's pistol, the other badly bruised by the massive fists of Dutch Dan. They were able to travel when forced to do so, and with their arms bound behind them, a rope around their necks, they were taken along the trail leading to the Scottish Chief.

While on the way, Ridge Tanner explained how it came that he put in an appearance so opportunely.

"You know, lad, I wasn't a bit easy when you tuck the tramp, anyway; an' I got me heap wuss when it come night an' you didn't show up. I hed it in the bones o' me that you was hev'in' trouble with them durned critters, an' so I jest picked out a few o' the lads an' we started out on the war-path. An' ef we hedn't run into ye by the way, durned ef we wasn't goin' to give all Rough Robin a holy benefit!"

"You came in good time, and I'm not sorry," was the grave response. "There's rocky times ahead, I fear me, but we mustn't crowd it any faster than we are compelled to."

"You seed that Valder, mebbe?" hesitated Tanner, anxious to learn what had transpired, yet fearing to seem officious.

"I saw him—yes. I'll tell you what passed between us in good time, daddy; but not just now. My brain is buzzing like a nest of bumblebees!"

"You ain't hurt—them cussed whelps didn't give ye no sickness?"

Tom Penny forced a laugh at this breathless inquiry.

"I'm sound enough in wind and limb, daddy. I've got a few beauty-marks, maybe, but nothing that won't fade out white in a few days. No; it's not that I'm worrying over, but—wait until we get to the mine, and I'll let you know all that is necessary, old fellow."

The Scottish Chief was gained, and the sharp challenge showed how well the place was guarded. The countersign was given, the gate opened to admit the party, Dutch Dan entering with the rest.

Tom Penny gripped Ridge Tanner by the arm as the pilgrim passed by, and hurriedly whispered in the veteran's ear:

"Look at that fellow close under the light; try to place his face as if your life depended upon it! Then come back to me and report."

If Tanner was puzzled by this peculiar speech, he gave no signs to that effect, but ten minutes later sought out the mine-manager.

"I don't know the rig-out, boss, but I do know that face!" he said.

"Whose face is it?"

"The old man's—the face o' Gregor McGregor!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

GRETCHEN IN SEARCH OF A LOVER.

SATISFIED that his coveted prey was blindly walking into the trap his busy brain had contrived, Lee Kavanagh lost no time in setting about perfecting the *alibi* on which he counted to guard himself from worse than empty suspicion when the vanishment of Tom Penny was made public by the mine-manager's friends. And the first move he took to that end, lay in hastening to the hotel where he had rooms.

He was a little late for supper, though a passing glance showed him a number of persons in the dining-room. He entered the bar, giving a little ejaculation as of surprise at glancing at the face of the clock over the array of glassware and bottles.

"So late!" he exclaimed, his gaze directing that of the barkeeper to the timepiece. "Past seven o'clock! Well, give me my customary, pard, though I hardly need it as an appetizer, now that I know I've kept my stomach waiting its rations nearly an hour over time. Business rather gets away with a fellow's time, don't it?"

It was not often Lee Kavanagh was so condescending, and he knew that he was sure of one reliable witness in favor of an *alibi*. The barkeeper was not likely to soon forget what had passed between them.

Kavanagh drank the liquor set out, then

turned to the dining-room, pausing at the entrance with a keen, swift glance over those present. He mentally registered each name, for use when necessary, though he came very near forgetting to do so as his jetty orbs rested on the trim, plump figure of Gretchen Stauffer, seated alone at one of the little side-tables, leisurely appeasing her hunger.

"Who and what is she?" flashed through the busy brain of the schemer, as it turned back to the curious part the little woman had played in the comedy down-town. "If Dutch Dan is Gregor McGregor, who then is Gretchen Stauffer?"

That was a question puzzling even to his keen wits. If the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg was really playing a part, surely this woman was an actor in the same scheme! But who could she be? Where had the grim old Scotchman picked her up? For sure it was, no woman had been in his company when he was captured.

Although his face showed nothing of the fact, Lee Kavanagh was sorely troubled over this fresh complication; for up to this minute he had overlooked Gretchen entirely.

"I've got to 'smoke' her, and there's no time like the present," he mentally decided, stepping forward and deliberately seating himself directly opposite the little woman, at the same table.

"I trust I am not intruding, madam?" he said softly, with a bland smile that showed his even teeth and rendered his dark face really handsome. "If so, I will take another table."

"There was plenty of room by this one—not?" murmured Gretchen with a shy, yet coquettish glance into his face, her pronunciation considerably improved from what it had been while she was so excited by the discovery of her recreant lover.

"Plenty, unless you object to company. This is my accustomed place, to tell the truth," glibly lying, for he had never before used that table, "yet I would hardly have dared claim it now had I not been so preoccupied—I really did not see you seated here; which is ample proof of a sadly befogged brain. Business upsets a man so awfully at times, you know!"

"Why should I object me?" softly murmured Gretchen, with another of her shy, yet bold glances as she added: "It is not merry to be alone at a table like this; it feels much nicer to have a shentlemans by—if he was—nice!"

Kavanagh smiled and bowed in return for the compliment; for such that last softly murmured word assuredly was.

"If you feel that way, what must be my experience as I look across the table to see—if I might venture to tell you exactly what feelings the sight of your charming face gives rise to in my heart!" he whispered, throwing a sentimental expression into his dark eyes.

"You was a marriest man?" murmured Gretchen, shyly.

"Not yet—and until this day I never thought I would meet a lady lovely enough to make me regret my being single."

"Is dot so? Well, you may tell me all dose feelings your heart fill up, if you please; it not make me mad grown—no!"

Coolly, quietly, frankly, with her big blue eyes scanning the dark face opposite, Gretchen uttered these words. And man of the world though Lee Kavanagh prided himself on being, he actually blushed redly! Even after what he had witnessed down-town, he was unprepared for such uncommon frankness on her part. Surely she must be husband-mad!

Gretchen smiled softly, coyly, as she partly veiled her eyes with their curving lashes. She seemed to interpret that flush as bashfulness on the part of this handsome gentleman, and it did not displease her greatly.

Lee Kavanagh managed to mutter something about another time; when so many eyes were not watching their actions, but Gretchen laughed.

"Dot vhas make noddink, my goot friendt! I care me nix for looks like dose—nein! Why not talk?" she added, more deliberately, and pronouncing her words more accurately in consequence. "Was a lady to never talk by a gentlemen? You was a single mans—"

Lee Kavanagh felt that he was making progress backward, and unblushingly corrected the first error into which he had fallen.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Stauffer! I really fear I blundered in answering your query a few moments since, or—did I actually tell you I was an unmarried man?"

"For sure you did, my goot friendt!"

"It was a slip of the tongue, for which I humbly beg your pardon!" with a low bow, adding: "What I intended to say was this: I am a *much*-married man! I have three wives, and twenty-seven children—the last time I had word from home! I am a Mormon, madame!"

While he spoke, a curious change came over the radiant face of the husband hunter, and as he ceased, she tossed her blonde head with curling lips and half-scornful tones:

"So many as dot? Und you only von mans! Vhell—I can do me better as dose, und—I guess I haf eated me all I vhas dis dime!"

A low laugh came from one of the nearest tables, but Lee Kavanagh did not mind that.

He had temporarily checked the matrimonial enthusiasm of this curious young lady, and now felt at liberty to pursue the idea which had flashed across his brain since taking his seat.

"You are not in such a hurry, Miss Stauffer? I was wondering whether or no to make a proposal—"

"Dree vives und dwendy-seven kinter—I vhas in a hoory shoost now, my goot friendt, und I haf me no dimes vor lisening to a brosal by you—I likes me no Mormons, anyhow!"

"Not on my own account, my dear, nor yet a proposal of marriage," with a soft laugh. "But I have a friend, a widower—"

In spite of himself Lee Kavanagh had to stop, so quickly did Gretchen resume the seat she had partly vacated, making a pretense of arranging her skirts to cover her sudden conversion.

"A widower? He don't got dree vives, den?" smiled Gretchen.

"No wife, and only one child; a daughter," bowed Kavanagh, red in the face but managing to control his voice fairly well. "I saw him only this evening, and he mentioned to me his wish to procure a housekeeper—I think it was a housekeeper! Anyway, he is very rich—"

"Und a widower! Go on, my ferry goot friendt!" eagerly murmured Gretchen, leaning her plump arms on the table, her blue eyes full of interest. "I likes me to liden to sthorys like dose!"

"I hesitated to mention the matter, though at first glance I felt sure you would suit my friend most admirably; he is a great lover of beauty in women, and—"

"In effery vhimmens, or only von vhimmens at a dime?"

"One at a time. He is not a Mormon."

"Dot ish petter! Go on, my goot friendt!" nodded Gretchen, smiling.

"As I said, my friend is rich, and pays liberally. Of course, I do not know whether you would condescend to accept wages, or take a position even where you would be honored and regarded as a lady, rather than—well," slightly floundering, "I thought I would just mention it, in case you would like to think the matter over."

Gretchen made no immediate reply, fingering her fork with her eyes downcast, a pretty pout on her red lips.

"I saw you down-town this afternoon," more frankly added Kavanagh, "and from what I heard there, I thought maybe you would like to find a nice place where you would be treated well, and where you could have a more comfortable home than here at a hotel, while making up your mind which man to choose for a husband."

"Und your friendt is galled?"

"Keefe Valder," leaning over the table and speaking guardedly.

"He vhas rich—und a widower; midoudt no dree vives?"

Lee Kavanagh nodded assent to all.

"Vhell, I dinks me dot oaser, und led you know py do-morrow!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A SPARROW WITH RUFFLED FEATHERS.

ENGLISH SPARROW, as a rule, had little stomach for hard and close fighting, but on this occasion it was all he could do to utter that shrill signal of retreat and defeat.

He had counted success as so sure! He had carried out the hasty instructions given him by Lee Kavanagh, his master, so perfectly though with so little time allowed him for working in, that he knew his credit for success would be all the greater. And though he had a holy horror of wounds and death where they concerned himself, personally, the little rascal in his wish to make a complete success of the affair, actually led his men to the assault: to be hurled end over end by a swinging stroke of Dutch Dan's mighty fist.

Thinking only of what Lee Kavanagh would say and do were he forced to carry a doleful tale of wretched failure to him, English Sparrow recovered himself, and once more leaped into the thick of the struggle. But an evil mischance seemed to have marked him out as its own, for the first flash from Tom Penny's revolver set his shaggy whiskers aflame, and fairly blinded the little rascal before he could smother the crisping fire.

Then came the ringing yell of Ridge Tanner, and English Sparrow was forced to utter the signal for hasty flight, himself leading the way with breakneck haste.

So it seemed, from the speed with which his nimble legs passed and repassed each other, but English Sparrow was far too cunning, far too cool and composed even in the face of shameful defeat, to continue in blind flight until utter exhaustion came to end the race. Only until he saw a good chance to leap unseen to one side of the pass where a steep but practicable slope permitted one to gain the wooded ground above and beyond. And after a cat-like scramble of a few moments, the shadow crouched down to await results.

He expected close and vengeful chase, as a matter of course. He knew that the mine-de-

fenders would readily place the outrage where it properly belonged, and never doubted their eagerness to partly pay off old scores now a fair chance was offered.

"Hit's risky hup 'ere, but not nigh so risky has hit would be fer to be puffink halong hon the level with them hinferral himps hafter ha cove, red-ot!" panted the little rascal, craning his neck and peering down into the gloomy pass beneath.

But as we have seen, Tom Penny checked all pursuit, and a few brief periods served to reassure English Sparrow on that point. He could not fully comprehend it, but the fact remained the same.

"Hif hit honly was that!" he suddenly ejaculated, his eyes glowing cat-like in the night. "Hof course hit's ag'inst horders, but hif one o' the lads 'ad made ha blunder hin tryink to break haway, 'oo's to say w'ich one hit was, hany 'ow?"

By a half-belief, half-hope that a serious accident had happened to Tom Penny, in that confused break-away alone could English Sparrow account for that lack of pursuit. And knowing that Lee Kavanagh would be even more furious were he to return to him with an imperfect report, the little rascal nerved himself to steal back toward the spot where the ambuscade had been unmasked.

He saw enough for his purpose: saw that both Tom Penny and the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg, whose coming to Rough Robin had created such a curious complication, were both on their own footing and apparently little the worse for their herculean efforts; he saw the two roughs held captive, and even caught the speech made by Tom Penny about having a better use for them than hanging out of hand.

"Worse hand worse, hand more hof hit!" the shadow groaned, shivering uncomfortably as he saw what a doleful tale he would be compelled to carry to Lee Kavanagh. "Hif them coveys was honly stiff-uns! Hif they'd honly tumble down hand bite their hown tongues hof so they couldn't squeal!"

Desperate enough was English Sparrow as he dogged the company back to the Scottish Chief, but there was no chance offered which even one so desperate could accept; it was clearly impossible to free the two prisoners, and only pausing long enough to be sure that Dutch Dan also entered the stockade, English Sparrow took to his heels and swiftly hurried toward Rough Robin, never pausing until past the scene of the ambuscade. Then he sent out clear, penetrating whistles at brief intervals as he kept along the back trail, one by one picking up his discomfited men, until the number was almost complete.

An ugly-looking, ugly-feeling set they were, too!

Hardly one of the lot but bore traces of that brief but hot "circus." Two of them had broken skin to show where the aimless bullets of Tom Penny had scored them; but neither wound was of much importance, looked at from a graveyard point of view.

"Needn't tell me!" growled one of the number, tightening a handkerchief which he had wound about his head. "There never yet was a Dutchman with a bunch o' fives like that! A bunch? Devil eat me for breakfast if he didn't hit me sixteen times, and each time with a different fist twice as big as the one that come before it! If I can wear anything smaller than a flour barrel for a hat in the morning, I'll reckon myself in big luck!"

It was a grim jest, but there were no grins to greet it. There were groans and curses instead, for hardly one of them but bore painful marks of Dutch Dan's bony fists.

And English Sparrow, even, had no stomach for jests. Though he had come through the row with little physical discomfort, his mind was in a very bad way. For he knew that Lee Kavanagh was even then waiting for his report. And what a report!

"Wat cawn't be 'elped, must be grinned hat, ye know," he growled as he satisfied himself that only the two men taken to the mine were lacking to complete their number. "Hit's ha nawsty bit hof ha job, for true, but we did hall we could to bring bit hof hin tip-top style, hand hif the cap'n don't like hit—"

"Let him tackle Dutchy himself!" curtly interjected the fellow with the swollen head.

In his secret soul English Sparrow wished that Lee Kavanagh might do this, but he said nothing of the sort in plain speech. Instead, he briefly advised his men to make their way back to town, and agreed on some story of a row between themselves to account for their battered appearance.

"There'll be ha rocky racket kicked hup, hover hit, ye know, hand we mustn't give 'em hany 'old hon hus more'n we can 'elp. The cap'n 'll stand by hus, hand with 'im hon hour side, hit's queer hif we cawn't come hout top o' the 'eap, don't ye know?"

English Sparrow nerved himself to the ordeal, though he would as soon have thrust his right hand into the flames as face Lee Kavanagh with the story he had to tell. But it would be even worse to try to keep out of his way.

"E'd smell me hout hif H'I was to bury myself hunder ha mountain hat the bottom hof the

hocean!" he groaned, brushing the cold sweat from his brow as he entered Rough Robin, heading for the hotel where he knew the dark-faced schemer would be in waiting. "E's the devil 'imself! Worse than the devil you read habout!"

Still with the *alibi* before his mind's eye, Lee Kavanagh was in the hotel bar, treating freely, making himself unusually affable, when his swift-roving eye caught a glimpse of English Sparrow peering through the open door. He made a covert signal which sent the human shadow back from the lamplight, and quickly framed an excuse that enabled him to leave the saloon alone.

"Well, how goes it, man?" he hastily muttered as he reached the side of the Sparrow, leading him into a dark, vacant bit of ground where there was little likelihood of their being seen or interrupted. "You have got them? You have done your work in good shape?"

Even as the last words left his lips, a black scowl came over his face and a fierce curse rose to his lips, for though English Sparrow had not uttered a word, that very slowness of speech told the plotter something had gone wrong.

"We did heverything just as you bade us, cap'n—"

"Then how did you slip up, you little devil?" grated Kavanagh.

"Through no lack hof trying, hany'ow!" muttered the Sparrow, with a measure of doggedness born of desperation, ready to duck from a blow and take to his heels if worse should come.

Mad as Lee Kavanagh undoubtedly was, he saw this, and curbed his hot anger until he should have learned all the human shadow could tell him. After that—!

"You did slip up on it, then?" he uttered, forcing a composure that seemed to frighten English Sparrow even more than a hotter outburst would have done.

Still, the little rascal nerved himself to tell the plain truth, save that he doubled the force of Ridge Tanner, and declared that they came down on them just when they were busiest binding both Tom Penny and Dutch Dan hand and foot, having captured them neatly as planned.

"Honly ha minute later, hand we'd ave 'ad 'em safe hand sound, ye know!" he groaned, with admirable regret. "But they blowed us hover hafone we knowed wat was hup, hand that's the hend hof hit! 'Ow we tried to bring hit hof, you'll see by the looks hof the lads; not one that's without 'is bloody marks for the show!"

Lee Kavanagh kept silence. He dared not speak, just then, lest his mad rage attract unwelcome attention.

And feeling that the matter was already as black as it could be, English Sparrow went on to tell of the two captured men, whom he had followed until they were taken inside the stockade. And, he added, one of them was unfortunately a fellow who could not bear anything like torture. He was picked for the ambush because of his bodily powers, and utter recklessness, but if the enemy were to "pinch him" a bit in trying to get at the truth of that night's work, he would surely "squeal!"

As he added this, English Sparrow held himself ready for the worst, but he drew a deep breath of relief when he saw how little Lee Kavanagh seemed to mind that bit of information. His brain was otherwise occupied, and he slowly uttered:

"You say he went with the rest? You saw this Dutch Dan enter the stockade? No lying; I want the barefooted truth, mind ye!"

"'Pon me soul I saw 'im go hinside, cap'n; hand 'e was thick has six hin ha bed with Tom Penny, so 'e was!"

Lee Kavanagh ground a savage oath between his teeth at this. More than ever he felt assured that this "Pilgrim from Spitzenberg" was none other than Gregor McGregor!

"It's a nasty job, all the way 'round!" he scowled, gnawing at his fingers in brief silence as his tiger-like eyes glowed redly in the gloom.

English Sparrow said nothing, but stood ready for flight in case his master should try to visit on his devoted head the penalty due that blunder. That time might come, but it was not yet due. Just at present Lee Kavanagh fancied he could make better use of the little rascal than crushing him at a blow. His brain was working, and a minute later he had his plans fairly shaped.

"It's a nasty job, sure enough, but now it's broke loose, we've got to force the fight without any let-up. Stick to me; do your duty well, and we'll bury this blunder of yours too deep for resurrection!"

"Honly say what H'I'm to do, cap'n!" eagerly muttered Sparrow.

"You say you saw Dutch Dan enter the stockade? Well, if he's inside, he can't get out without we're a mind to let him! You must go there, and lay low. You must watch close, and if Dutch Dan tries to leave the stockade—"

"H'I'll shoot him?" asked Sparrow, as his master hesitated.

"No; you'll shadow him wherever he goes. You'll keep track of him, no matter the trouble

or cost; but no killing, even if the devil should 'smoke' you! Use your heels, then, but don't run too far to keep on his scent after. Unless I'm 'way off, right there is the key to the whole game! Do your part, Sparrow, and when cashing-in time comes, be sure you won't have to go away with empty hands! Now—off with you!"

"H'I'll stick to 'im closer than 'is hown shadow, cap'n!"

CHAPTER XX.

HARD WORDS BETWEEN ROGUES.

It was pretty well along in the night when English Sparrow darted away to carry out his latest instructions from Lee Kavanagh, but the last-named worthy paid little attention to the hour. He thought no more about his carefully planned *alibi*; with two prisoners in his hands, Tom Penny could easily gain proof of his complicity too strong to be upset by any *alibi*.

"If he forces it—but will he?" mused the dark-faced schemer, as he stared vacantly after the human shadow, who quickly faded from view in the gloom. "Not if that infernal Dutchman is what I think. If he is Gregor McGregor, they'll come back at us in quite another shape."

This thought seemed to guide his decision, for he abruptly turned on his heel and strode swiftly away toward the house of Keefe Valder.

"It won't make much difference what his decision, if this is really the old man stole away from the boys—Satan grill them eternally for letting him slip their grip!" with vicious emphasis. "Even though he agreed to knuckle down—inspired by the divine Alcina—he'd swallow his words after a powwow with old McGregor."

Still, he did not hesitate, but kept rapidly on until he gained the building, his hard knuckles making the barrier echo loudly. And, just as in the case of Tom Penny, a few hours before, Keefe Valder appeared to be lying in wait, from the celerity with which he opened the door.

"It's you, at last," he uttered, the lamplight showing a dark frown upon his full face.

"Soon enough, never you worry, pard!" laughed Lee Kavanagh, all his frowns and grimaces and hot rage masked as if by magic.

"Come in, can't you? Another ten minutes would have found me between the sheets. Why have you kept me waiting so long? Have you forgotten what we agreed upon between us?"

Keefe Valder was far too irritable for all to have gone well with him since their separation, as one far less acute than Lee Kavanagh could have seen, but this discovery only served to still further nerve the younger partner. And cool, calm, smiling blandly, he crossed the threshold, leading the way into the room where Tom Penny fought a good fight for honor against temptation.

"I am a little late, to be sure," he said, coolly, as he poured out a glass of whisky and held it up between his eyes and the lamplight before sipping its contents. "But I was detained on business, and could hardly come sooner. Better late than never, somebody once said, for to judge from your impatience, our young friend of the Scottish Chief has concluded to meet us on our own footing, eh?"

Keefe Valder dropped into a chair, resting his elbows on the table, his fat chin supported upon his joined palms, his brows corrugated, a dark and troubled scowl shadowing his features.

Lee Kavanagh took a seat opposite, still smiling through his glass between his dainty sips. No one seeing him just then could have suspected what a boiling rage was really eating out his heart below that bland and pleasant mask.

"So our good friend concluded to come down, did he?" he added, seemingly ignorant of his partner's scowls. "I'm glad of that—glad to the bottom of my boots! For I've got a bit of deucedly ugly news to impart as my share, and by putting the two together we can sort of even up and bring about a pleasanter average; don't you see?"

Keefe Valder gave a surly grunt that seemed to startle his partner and bring his wide-open eyes for the first time fairly upon his disturbed countenance.

"What!" with well affected amazement. "You don't mean to say that you've slipped up in your little plot, do you? Surely the young idiot never threw such a glorious temptation over his shoulder?"

"Didn't he?" snarled Valder, with a venomous flash of his jetty eyes. "Then I am lying, instead of you, Lee Kavanagh!"

The little farce was played out. Lee Kavanagh brushed it aside, growing cold and hard as he replaced his emptied glass on the table.

"Your face is not lying, whatever your tongue may attempt," he uttered, leaning on the table much as his partner was doing, their eyes meeting steadily. "I saw at first glance how utterly you had bungled your share of the play, but it will do no harm to bear your excuses. How did it all come about?"

"What's the use of going into particulars?" scowled Valder, sourly. "Enough that he wouldn't touch the bait!"

"Not even when you brought in the divine Alcina?"

Keefe Valder flinched uneasily at the fierce sneer with which Lee Kavanagh uttered these words. He recalled how stubbornly the younger member of the firm had fought against that part of the scheme. He knew that in yielding even so far as he had yielded, Kavanagh at the same time set down a score against him which would not be easy to wipe out.

"Not even then," he sulkily muttered; then, with a flash of his old-time spirit: "And when I saw how hard it was—when I saw the lad giving up all he held dearest and most precious in this life, simply because he would not betray a trust—hanged if I wasn't proud of him! For about ten seconds!"

With a short, hard laugh came this addition.

"I feel sorry for you," slowly uttered Kavanagh, showing his white teeth in an evil smile as he spoke, his eyes glowing like those of a hungry beast in the dark. "Not only because the scheme in which you took so much pride failed, but it must have cut deeply to be declined without thanks as a papa-in-law by such a model young man!"

Keefe Valder shifted uneasily on his seat. He would prefer hot raging to this coldly sneering mockery, for he knew that Lee Kavanagh was never more dangerous than when he smiled after that fashion.

"I did my best. I'm free to own my mistake in summing up Tom Penny. More than that, I was deceived in counting on the girl, too!"

"She balked, then?" with swift interest in face and tones.

"There was a moment when I believed a single word from her lips would have turned the tables in our favor; but instead of saying that word, she did her level best to strengthen him in what he held to be his sacred duty, curses on the crooked luck!"

"And he flatly refused to take that order as final, then?"

Keefe Valder nodded assent.

"Then our cake is dough, of course!"

"What makes you say that?" with sudden energy. "How are we any worse off than we were before he came here in answer to my request?"

Then Lee Kavanagh threw off the last remnant of his mask, his face fairly convulsed with bitter rage and hatred, his eyes glowing redly, his voice full of venomous emotion as he grated:

"Because you have played the cowardly ass from first move to the last! Because your infernal squeamishness and low, counterfeit cunning has made a foul mess of as neat a plot and daring a game as ever mortal brain conceived! Only for that, we would have won the prize long ago! And now—the jig is up and the devil to pay for piping!"

Keefe Valder stared open-mouthed at his partner in evil, for the moment fairly stupefied by that savage outburst. But he quickly rallied and gave evidence that he had a fair amount of pluck for all.

"You are drunk, Lee Kavanagh. You don't show it in your actions, but you do in your speech. You'd better go back to the hotel and take a sleep. Then, when you are a little more of a man, come back here and I'll talk the matter over with you."

Kavanagh made no effort to check that coldly blunt speech, his red lips curling back from his teeth in an evil smile.

"One would think, from simply hearing you talk, that I was accountable for this miserable fiasco!"

"Once more, how much worse is it now than it was this morning? We both knew that Tom Penny was resolved to hold the mine even against an armed force such as we can bring to bear. There was just a chance of breaking him down, and that chance I made the most of. Be sure it failed, but you discounted that failure in advance. Then, what are you kicking about so furiously?"

"Not about Tom Penny. Not about the ugly test to which you put the girl whom I have sworn to make my wife. Not about this failure at all, but kicking at your bull-headed blindness from the very first step."

"Only for you, there would have been no writing of orders and notes to which secret signals were appended. Only for you, Gregor McGregor would have left the game long ago, with the pick of his trumps in our possession, with Tom Penny playing a lone hand on the refuse of the pack! And right there you see what makes me kick so lustily, my good fellow!" nodded Lee Kavanagh, sharply.

"If there's a secret sign on that note, who's to point it out besides Tom Penny? Who's to know what it means save him? And who'll take any stock in his talk, when once we've gained possession of the mine?"

"Whom, do you ask? What do you say to the old man himself?"

"The old—not old McGregor?" stared Valder, puzzled.

"Ay! the old mule whom you would not listen to being sent over the range in good earnest; and who has slipped through our fingers—"

"What do you mean by that?" gasped Valder, turning fairly livid.

"That Gregor McGregor is in the mine, with Tom Penny—no less!"

CHAPTER XXI.

NO MORE HALF-WAY MEASURES.

KEEFE VALDER fell back in his seat, stricken dumb by those words, yet it may be doubted if he fully realized their meaning all at once.

Lee Kavanagh laughed shortly, hardly as he watched that paling face, and had there been other eyes upon the men, they might have seen that the younger schemer was paying himself in part for what he had that day suffered.

In sober truth, he had suffered much. He loved Aleina Valder as truly as it lay in his power to love any one. He had fought against the test which Keefe Valder placed so much reliance in, yielding only when he saw that further resistance was worse than vain. And when it came to be put into execution, he found the trial even worse than he anticipated.

True, he had never meant that Tom Penny should wear the prize, even should he betray his trust in hopes of so doing, nor did Keefe Valder so intend. With the property fairly in their possession, the fellow was to be disposed of summarily. Still, it cut him deep to even permit a meeting between his hated enemy and the woman he loved so fiercely. And now he had a chance to get partly even with the one who had forced that trial upon him!

Not until Keefe Valder broke through the brief stupefaction which fell upon him, did Lee Kavanagh offer an explanation.

"It is truth, bitter pill though you find it, Valder," he said, his vicious mirth abruptly vanishing as he again leaned across the table between them. "The lads—devil make their beds!—have managed to let the old man slip from their grasp, and he's now keeping Tom Penny company inside the Scottish Chief stockade!"

"It cannot be! I will not believe it!" gasped Valder, brushing one trembling hand across his brows, damp with a cold, clammy sweat.

"Nor would I if I hadn't seen the villain himself," grimly muttered Kavanagh, settling himself to give an account of what had transpired since their last parting.

He omitted nothing, Keefe Valder listening with fallen jaw and still dazed eyes. What he had not seen for himself, he had gathered with tolerable accuracy from the talk which flew lively enough in Rough Robin that night. He told how English Sparrow met the counterfeit Dutchman, and how the little rascal "put up a job" on the seeming greenhorn; told how Billy Baldwin met more than his match in this self-styled "Pilgrim from Spitzenberg," told of Gretchen Stauffer and all that followed her coming, up to the arrival of Tom Penny on the scene.

"From the first glance I suspected the cunning old rascal, and all doubts were swept away when I saw how that villain started and changed color as he caught sight of the old man. I knew it, then! And every incident since but strengthens my belief that this Dutch Dan is none other than Gregor McGregor!"

"But how—it can't be!" almost helplessly muttered Valder, who was desperately striving to collect his scattered senses.

Lee Kavanagh went on to narrate how English Sparrow was dispatched with a force of trusty fellows to waylay and capture the pair as they turned toward the Scottish Chief Mine. He told the story as the Sparrow gave it him, making but a single reservation; he never hinted at his secret intention of holding the two men captive purely for his own benefit!

That was well enough when a fair chance offered itself, but now he knew he could not have too many allies in the pending fight for the bonanza. If victory became theirs, time enough then to play "a cross" on this stupid mass of fat!

Having told his story up to the present, Lee Kavanagh again turned to the decanter, the strong liquor apparently affecting him no more than so much water might have done. He filled a second glass and pushed it across to his partner in evil, sharply bidding him drink.

"It will do you good, and this is no time for doubt," he said, in cold, half-scornful tones. "You are half asleep—wake up, man! There's work to be done, and you've got to do your share! The time for squeamishness is past and gone; from this on we play our cards to win, whether they fall on velvet or in steaming blood!"

Mechanically Keefe Valder did as he was bade, and the fiery poison seemed to be just what was lacking. A faint tinge of color crept back to his face, and a clearer light came into his eyes. Of his own accord he replenished his glass, Kavanagh nodding grim approval.

"Even Dutch courage is better than none, pard," he said, showing his teeth after that disagreeable fashion.

Keefe Valder shook himself together, and began to look more like his wonted self. His tones were a bit husky and uncertain, but it was

plain to be seen he was rapidly rallying from the stunning shock his partner in crime had dealt him with those sharp words.

"If you knew he was—was the old fellow—why didn't you make sure of him when you had a chance? Why come here and charge me with clumsy bungling, when you had just let him slip through your fingers?"

Lee Kavanagh shrugged his shoulders with a grim smile.

"Because I am not quite a fool, whatever my choice of partners may seem to prove. A word from him, or from Tom Penny, would have brought half the town on my back; you know how evenly the crowd is divided on this question."

Valder nodded assent. He did know, only too well. Had the question been less one of partisanship, it might have been decided long before this. As it was, Rough Robin was like a smoldering volcano. And when the explosion should come, it was difficult to predict which side would suffer the most.

"I forgot that," he muttered, scowling. "No doubt you acted all for the best. Still—I can't make it come right! I can't believe he escaped the men you placed over him with such strict orders! Even now I can't realize that you haven't made a strange mistake!"

"If you had been on the spot, to see that face as I saw it, before the cunning demon had time to pull his mask of stupidity fairly back again, you would find it heap easier to believe than to doubt. Still, I'm taking no long chances in this bit of a game. I've set English Sparrow to shadowing the old villain, and be sure he'll keep him in trim until he's wanted or we prove him an outsider altogether. As for me, I'm off with the dawn to the den. I'll see if our game has really slipped his leash."

"And then?"

"If he is gone, we know in what quarter to look for him. If he is still in limbo—which I can't bring myself to think, try hard as I may and do—then I'll see that he gives no further fright!"

Keefe Valder shivered perceptibly, and with a curious working in his throat that told how difficult speech was, just then, he muttered:

"No bloody work, Kavanagh! Not until we get him to write!"

"He wrote once, and what came of it?" viciously cut in the younger rogue. "Nothing but setting Tom Penny still more firmly against us! Nothing but proving what he only suspected before: that we were trying to ring in a cold deck on him! That comes of giving your mighty brain room to spread itself," in calmer tones, but with a bitter contempt that brought a hot flush to the face of the speculator.

"I thought it sure to work," he muttered, sulkily.

"And laughed at me when I said that less frills and more plain sewing would make a heap more substantial suit. But let it go at that. You've had your watch on deck, and now I'm running the ship; and I'll either fetch our haven in quick time, or we'll make a glorious swirl as we founder!"

Again Keefe Valder shivered, and he looked as though he could readily prophesy which of these two events was the more likely to come about. But, as Kavanagh had said, his method had only brought disaster on their heads, and he could not stand out with good grace against a change of course.

"We've got to get down to sober business. No more half-measures. It's rule or ruin with us now, and the sooner you pin that truth fast in your memory, the safer we'll both be!"

"If I find the old man is still in limbo, then we've got to find out just who this devil is with his face and figure. If he isn't our game, he's playing a part of some sort, for I'll take oath he's no more Dutch than I am. And with him to aid Tom Penny, we'll find our hands full, even with the old man to pinch!"

"Make sure McGregor is in bonds, and I'll never worry my brain over the Dutchman," scowled Valder, pouring out another glass of liquor.

Lee Kavanagh showed his teeth in an ugly smile as he retorted:

"Your brains are off duty, remember; my brains are running the game for the present; and that will last until I make as bad a blunder as you did in risking this last play."

Valder made no response. Knowing Kavanagh as well as he did, he felt that any remonstrance would be worse than wasted.

"Now for your part; I've already paved the way for you, on the bare chance that I may have been mistaken in spotting this pretended Dutchman. You remember the girl I spoke about? Well, as soon as it gets light enough, you must go down to the hotel and hire her to come here; as housekeeper, maid, cook—anything, just so you get her to come."

Keefe Valder started up in his seat, astonishment showing plainly in his broad face.

"Hire her—bring her here—what for?"

"So we may know when and where to put a hand on her if wanted."

"But, if she is playing in cahoots with that fellow? And if he is dangerous, why not she? You don't mean it, man!"

"You will hire her and bring her here, no matter what wages she may demand," was the cold, hard response. "I can't understand *how* she came to get in with that fellow, but she is in with him; they are both playing a part for some reason; and right there is my best reason for telling you to do this bit of work. Granting they are playing a part; granting that she is backing him; isn't it better to have her under the eye of one of us all the time than to let her run at will, free to work and plan while we remain in the dark?"

Keefe Valder was silenced, if not convinced. That he was uneasy, his restless movements plainly proved. But after his recent back-set, he found it difficult to hold his own against his partner in crime.

"I've told you enough to let you into the game she pretends to be playing. She carries it off to perfection, but still I believe it is all put on for the occasion. You can bring her to bag, I reckon, by playing the part I assigned you in advance, that of a rich widower. She'll jump at the chance if she's really what she pretends. If she refuses to hire out, then you may be dead sure she's playing a part that means you and I no good!"

"If she does refuse—what then?" sullenly.

"Keep an eye on her movements until I get back from my run to the den. We can't afford to lose a trick now, for defeat means more than a loss of gold; it means a loss of breath for both of us."

There was no need of his speaking plainer, just then, for Keefe Valder showed by his changing countenance how thoroughly those last words, hissed across the table, were comprehended.

"I'll do what I can, though I still think it would be better for me to hold off until after you've made a run over the hills. Until that is done, we're only working in the dark, and may blunder even worse than you accused me of doing to-day."

"You will do just as I have advised, or I throw up the job for good and all, letting you work your head out of a noose as best you can," harshly retorted Kavanagh.

"All right, I'll do it!" with sudden recklessness. "From this on I'll give you full swing, and we'll see what comes of it."

Lee Kavanagh made no response. He did not even appear to know that his partner was speaking. He was silently rising from his seat, his glowing eyes fixed on the closed door. With a tiger-like bound he crossed the intervening space, turning the knob and flinging the door wide open—to reveal a shrinking figure just beyond!

CHAPTER XXII.

"IF I AM NOT I, WHO AM I?"

RIDGE TANNER spoke positively, and Tom Penny drew a long breath of relief as he listened. It was as though those haunting doubts, those startling suspicions, had at last been resolved beyond all question.

"I almost knew as much," he muttered, with a quick glance around them, as though to make sure the "Pilgrim from Spitzenberg" was not within earshot.

"I'm monstrous glad he's turned up, but durned ef I kin make out why he sticks so mighty tight to the Dutchy part, now he's safe in his own kingdom ag'in!" with a covert glance into the face of his companion, as though hoping for a bit of information in turn.

This was just what bothered Tom Penny, too. He could account for Dutch Dan's keeping his mask on as long as there was any chance of being "smoked" by the enemy, but his keeping it up now that they were fairly under friendly cover, gave him no little uneasiness.

"I'll find out just what it means, if plain speaking can fetch it about," he decided, his jaws setting with an audible click. "Go tell him that I want to see him in the office. Then see that none of the lads comes near enough to bother us, will you?"

Ridge Tanner nodded assent, and hurried away into the gloom. And a few moments later he reappeared, bringing Dutch Dan with him, dropping back as the pilgrim entered the little office where Tom Penny stood in the dim light of the one candle that stood on the rude table and desk combined.

"Dot v heller dells me you vphants me to look at, my goot friendt," uttered Dutch Dan, curiosity feebly visible in his gaunt face. "Vhas dot so, or vhas he shoost blaying him an Abril vool shoke by me?"

"Isn't it about time you dropped the mask, Mr. McGregor?" coldly uttered Tom Penny, his face showing white and stern as he added: "You are among friends who surely have proved their fidelity too completely for even a Scotchman to distrust. Then why persist in playing this uncouth part?"

Dutch Dan stared at him with drooping jaw, his blue eyes widely open, full of dull wonder and doubt.

"I nakes me noddink oudt uff dot vords, my goot friendt! Vhat vhas dot—mask? I got me noddinks to drop: see?" and he held out his empty hands, casting a slow glance downward over his person, then once more gazing into the

face of the mine-manager with a curious mixture of doubt and suspicion.

Tom Penny impulsively caught up the candle, holding it so close to the face of the gaunt man that Dutch Dan instinctively closed his eyes for an instant, as though fearing the flame. But they opened quickly, and he stood staring blankly into the face of his companion as Penny keenly scanned each inch of his leathern visage.

"Vhell," he said deliberately, as Penny turned to replace the candle on the table again, "I dinks you know me nexdt dime ve meet. Uff you vhas not dink der same vbay, keeb on doing dot some more. Id vhas a blaguey goot shoke—maype! I makes me laugh oudt loudt when you show me how dot shoke roons—eh?"

"Who are you, anyway?" desperately cried Penny, more thoroughly bewildered than before; for surely no man could so completely wear a mask as to foil an examination like this.

"My name vhas Daniel Goodykoontz. I comes a bilgrim from Spitzenberg, vhere der bolar pear und der zeal und der vballrus grow like abbles dot blum dree on! Dot's vhat I dinks me when I come by dis blace Rough Ropin down; bud I vindts me so many vool vbellers dot say I vhas somepody else, I pegins me to vounder uff I vhas me or uff I vhas a sdray galf dot's got der wrong basdure indo—yaw!"

With something like anger came these words; anger not unmixed with suspicion, to tell the truth; and as he spoke, Dutch Dan edged a little further away from the mine-manager, one huge hand closing up in a fist that had already proved itself a most efficient weapon.

Pale, his face hard-set, Tom Penny held that order to turn the mine and all its belongings over to Keefe Valder before the pilgrim, one finger pointing out the secret sign as he spoke again:

"Then you never wrote this order? You did not make this sign? You are not Gregor McGregor?"

With owlsh gravity Dutch Dan looked at the document, then shook his head vigorously as he bluntly declared:

"I neffer writes dose. I gan me not write dot Merican vhay. I neffer saw me dot avore you showed me dose pack in Rough Ropin down. Und uff I vhas me dot name you sboken, I neffer knows me mineselluf who I vhas undil you dells me—so hellup me cracious mercy!"

A little complicated, it may be, but undoubtedly earnest. And Tom Penny felt his heart sink in his bosom heavy as a lump of lead. His haunting doubts were gone at last, but he would right gladly have welcomed them back again, so bitter was the disappointment he now felt.

There was so much at stake, and everything rested on his shoulders. It was such a hard fight. And even should he prove victorious in the end, victory would mean the blackest, bitterest defeat to himself!

"I beg your pardon," he managed to utter, putting back that bit of paper in a place of safety. "If you knew how marvelously like your face is to that of a friend—of the owner of this mine—whose presence is sadly needed here just now, you would not think so strange of my persisting in questioning you. Even now I can hardly believe you are a stranger instead of Gregor McGregor!"

"Vhas dot so? Und he vhas so mooch like me? Und you vhas oxbecting him by this vhay booty soon? Und—py shings!" with an abrupt start and excited flourish of his hands as he added: "Uff he cooms dot Rough Ropin down by—und meeds my Gretchen—und she meeds him—und he looks so mooch like me—vhat make all dose? More droubles, py cracious mercy! Und I vhasn'td glose enough vor shumbing in der mittle between dose dwo volks uff dey dakes a notion vor making oop py each oder! Uff Gretchen vhas giff him dot shance like she giff me! Uff he vhasn'td a grazy-mat vool like I show me oudt! Uff he shumbs dot shance at—und roons away mit dot vhimmens—I go me loonadicks all oafar py shoost dinking py dot!"

More and more excited grew the pilgrim, until he was striding to and fro, shaking his clinched fists now, wringing his fingers then, burying them in his shaggy hair next, the very picture of bewildered agitation. And as Tom Penny looked on, his doubts fled forever. This was not Gregor McGregor. The stiff, dignified, cold-blooded Scotchman could never play a part like that.

The poor pilgrim seemed so wildly excited that, despite his own troubles, Tom Penny strove to console him, assuring him that even if his double should come to town and chance to meet Gretchen, he would be proof against her charms, great as those undoubtedly were. But Dutch Dan was not to be comforted so easily, though he gradually grew calmer and raved less like a lunatic broke loose.

"You didn't vabs know dot Gretchen like I vabs knows her, my goot friendt," he muttered, shaking his head gloomily. "All vhimmens vabs vhimmens, bud Gretchen vabs a hail uff a vhimmens! She vabs make noddinks uff a man

didn't shumb py dot shance when she makes dot schweed leedle vink off hers—nein! She shoost graps him dot gollar py und rakes him like she vabs a bollicemans! Nein! nein! I druds me her noddinks! I makes me py dose Rough Ropin down in a hoory!"

He snatched up the cap which he had knocked to the floor in his agitation, pulling it over his head and ears as he turned to the door, Tom Penny having barely time to catch an arm before he plunged out.

"There surely is no such hurry, my good fellow," the mine-manager said, smothering his laughter as best he could; for even more than his printed words will show, Dutch Dan was acting after a supremely ridiculous fashion just then. "It is dark, and the way is strange to you. Besides, even if you could find the right trail, remember that there are some hard cases in town who have little to love you for. Wait until day dawns, and I'll see you safe in town; I'll give you an introduction to some of my friends, who will stand by you if you ever get into trouble with those rascals."

"I vould sthop—bud I couldn't, my goot friendt," said Dutch Dan, brushing a hand hastily across his face, his tones husky and far from steady. "I vhas veel like I vhas a graveyardt in vwhile I sdops me here. Und—Gretchen! You don'td know dot vhimmens! She vhas von leedle ainshell, bud—she vphants her a man—und uff she don'td got me, den she dakes some oder von! Und dot my heardt go ssplit vide oben in sixteen biecs! I must go me away, my goot friendt! Und uff I couldn'td go me beaceaple away, like I brever—den I goes me in a zyglone uff hair und vool und legs und podies! I vhas a vhighter when I gits me my grazy-matness up poiling oafar!"

In vain Tom Penny argued against this mad adventure at such an hour, but Dutch Dan would not listen. He slung his pack on his back, clubbed his staff and demanded free exit. And when this was granted, he strode swiftly away through the darkness—dogged by a human shadow.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SPARROW FAIRLY LINED.

ENGLISH SPARROW felt like congratulating himself over his escape thus far from a double peril; and in his estimation that from Lee Kavanagh was by no means the least to be feared. And it was with something close akin to gratitude in his heart to the dark-faced schemer for having mercifully withheld his angry hand that the human shadow made all haste to the vicinity of the Scottish Chief stockade.

And English Sparrow it was who silently, persistently dogged the footsteps of Dutch Dan, the self-styled "Pilgrim from Spitzenberg."

"Hit's 'im, sure henough," the human shadow muttered beneath his breath, as he hugged his covert closely, lying so low that he brought the upper portion of the gaunt figure above the skyline. "Hit's the slippery hold codger, for keeps. Hif the cap'n was honly 'ere, vhat ha glorious chance hit would be—ow heasy we could rake 'im hin!"

Muttering, gesticulating, Dutch Dan strode past his covert, and as silently as though composed of naught more substantial than a fog-wreath, English Sparrow stole along on his trail.

"Hit's ha rum hold start, hand H'I don't see just vhat fer 'e's taking ha ramble like this, bunless they've kicked 'im bout. Hif so, 'e surely hysn't the hold gent, hand hit's ha bloomink sell!"

As the idea flashed across his busy brain, English Sparrow came to an abrupt halt in the trail, trying to picture the mad chagrin which would surely overcome Lee Kavanagh when he found out how thoroughly his imagination had played him false. But only for a brief space.

"Horders his horders, hand mine is to stick to 'im like wax," the spy muttered, with a dogged nod of his shaggy head as he once more pressed along through the gloom, straining his eyes in order to keep the pilgrim in sight without himself incurring too great risk of being discovered. "Hif hit was the hold boy 'imself, H'i'd keep hon 'is track through thick and thin, heven hif hit led me down to Tophet himself rather than face the cap'n with hanother story hof ha bun-gle."

Despite the darkness, he did not find it a very difficult matter to keep on the scent. Dutch Dan was an easy man to track, for he seemed to have no idea of caution, blundering along the rocky trail, his heavy brogans making a rare scuffle among the flinty fragments. And at times his voice came floating back to the ears of the grinning shadow, now lovingly uttering the name of Gretchen Stauffer, then muttering sonorous curses against the audacious diggers who dared even lift their covetous eyes toward his individual treasure.

"Hit's taking a mud-en for ha canvas-back," grinned English Sparrow, more than ever convinced that his master was barking on the wrong track. "But H'I'm honly ha deck and this trip. 'Shadow,' 'e said, hand shadow hit's got to be."

It may have been that this growing belief made the spy less cautious than he would have

been had he felt assured he was shadowing a man of greater caliber than Dutch Dan had shown himself the past day, but certain it is that when, a few minutes later, English Sparrow lost sound of that grumbling voice and those shuffling brogans, he quickened his pace through fear of losing his game altogether. And then, as he dodged around a storm-scarred bowlder, he fairly ran against the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg, whose muscular arms closed about him, lifting him from his feet and twisting him about like a bundle of straw.

"I dinks me I vhas hear somedinks cooming py dis vhay, und dot vhas so, too!" chuckled the Dutchman, heaving the kicking, squirming spy above the level of his head, seemingly with the intention of dashing him to the ground as the most expeditious method of disposing of him.

"'Ave mercy! 'Old hon—don't drop me!" gasped English Sparrow, trying to grip his captor firmly enough to save himself from that menacing danger.

"Vhell, vhell, shoost liden py dose!" exclaimed Dutch Dan, with a deft movement lowering his captive and holding his face at a level with his own, staring keenly through the gloom. "Uff I don't vhas make some voolishness py mineselluf, I hear me dose schweed woices pevore! Dot vhas you, my ferry goot friendt, ain't it—nein?"

English Sparrow made a vigorous effort to break away from his stalwart captor, twisting and writhing like an eel, but in vain. Tighter grew that grip, until his muscles seemed crushing to pulp, and he was forced to cease his efforts with a howl of anguish.

"Mercy! you're crushing me! 'Ave mercy hif—ow-ow!"

"Vhas I binch you, leedle v heller?" innocently ejaculated the pilgrim as his captive shivered with pain and terror. "Vhell, vhell, dot vhas too pat! I neffer me dinks uff dose; I vhas so awfully glat py zeeing you soom more dime alreaty so kvick!"

"I wasn't doing nothink—I wasn't heven thinking hof—"

"Und I dinks me now I vhasn'td neffer dank you vor making me so mooch foon py dot Hough Ropin down! Id vhasn'td many dime I show me so imbolite like dose, my goot friendt, und now I got me a shance for making dose ox-cooses, I neffer giff me dem oop pevore I shows me dot I vhasn'td shuck oop mit undankvullness—sure!"

While blandly uttering these words, Dutch Dan was coolly disarming his captive, and knotting his hands firmly behind his back. He paid not the slightest attention to the struggles or remonstrances of the spy, but stuck to his task with business-like persistence until it was well done. Then, swinging the little rascal over his shoulder as easily as he handled his dusty pack, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg turned about and strode briskly through the gloom toward the Scottish Chief stockade.

English Sparrow, still having full use of his tongue, begged and cursed by turns, even trying threats on his sturdy captor, who minded him no more than he did the faint murmuring of the night air as it eddied through the rocky crags above their heads. And not until they drew near to the stockade did Dutch Dan deign to make any reply:

"I dinks me, my goot leedle friendt, it vhas maybe petter as you glap a sdobbing-dackle py dose glabber-dung uff yours. Ve vhas goming bloody glose dose vortivigations py, und dem mans vbat keeps guart ofer dose blaces vhas grazy vor hearing dem goons go schood oudt. Und uff you gits me killed shoost vor dalking py yourself, I licks you like tarnadion—vor sure I vhall, now!"

"Who comes there?" cried out a clear, stern voice from the dimly visible stockade. "Speak quick, or down goes your meat-house!"

"Dot vhas only me—Daniel Goodykoontz, a Bilgrim from Spitzenberg!" briskly called out Dutch Dan in response. "I gots me a v heller who vhas blaying shy or soomdinks like dot, und uff you vhas vphant him vor looking at, I prings me him insite booty kvick now!"

There was a brief silence, after which the voice of Tom Penny was heard, uttering the words:

"You know where the gate stands; advance, and you'll be let in. If you're trying any skin game, better drop out while your head's warm!"

"Yaw—I knows me dot gate, und I vhas cooming in a hoory!"

Tom Penny himself admitted the pilgrim, and he uttered a short exclamation of surprise as Dutch Dan dumped his captive at his feet. By the dim light of a lantern brought forward by Ridge Tanner, the mine-manager had no difficulty in recognizing the spy.

"Where did you find him, and how?" he asked, with a keen glance up at the stolid face of the pilgrim who stood by, apparently taking the whole affair as a matter of course incident.

"Vhell, I haf to sthop a leedle und dinks uff I vhas vindt him, or he vhas vindt me," deliberately responded the fellow, rubbing his chin and dubiously staring into the face of his captive. "I hear me somedinks go grubbing und shiding oafar dem bebble-dones in dot roadt

py yonder, und I dinks me maype dem vhas some bolar pear or vhalrusses dot schmeil my meat und hoongry gits vor eating. Und I schlibs me down dot pig rock behindt, und dot leedle vheiler he rams his headt shuck ub my sdomach in, und I graps him my dwo fists mit, und he hollers dot he don't vhas making soom droobles, und—vbell, I dinks me I pring him py dis blace und see vhat you dinks—ain'd it?"

"Lee Kavanagh sent you, of course, Sparrow?"

The spy was trying hard to see a loophole out of this ugly trap, but that was a difficult task even for so adroit a liar as himself. And in his desperation he blurted out:

"Hit's hall ha bloomin' mistake, cap'n! H'I wasn't there—hor, hif H'I was, H'I didn't know hit huntil that crazy rascal picked me hup like ha 'awk nabbing 'is dinner!"

"You didn't know you were skulking around this stockade?"

"So 'elp me, cap'n! The last I remember was going hoff to sleep hin my bown bunk hat 'ome, hand hif that bloomin' lhidiot didn't fetch me hall the way 'ere, then H'I must 'ave been walkin' hin my sleep!"

"A somnambulist, eh?" laughed the mine-manager, though there was little of mirth in his face or tones.

"Vhell, dot gits me!" gasped Dutch Dan, with widely opened eyes and uplifted hands, as he stared at the little rascal. "Dot gits me how a leedle vheiler like dose kin holdt sooch pig lies like dem!"

"I reckon ef we was to turn the leetle cuss over to the lads, they mought be able fer to squeeze the truth out o' him, boss," suggested Ridge Tanner, in grimly significant tones.

Tom Penny was keenly watching the spy as the veteran made this suggestion, and by the dim light he saw his face grow dogged. Plainly English Sparrow was making up his mind to tell nothing that could be of service to those with whom his master was at odds.

"You can guess what that means, Sparrow," he said, coldly. "You're not nigh so big a fool as you try to make out. You are plenty smart to know that we've got you foul, and that if we choose we can make you talk right up to the mark. And knowing this—what did Lee Kavanagh set you and your bull-dogs on us two fellows for, a bit ago?"

"E never set nobody hon nothink has H'I knows hof," muttered the spy, sullenly casting down his eyes. "'Ow H'I come 'ere his ha puzzle to me. Hall H'I know his H'I'm hinnocent hof hany wrong; hunless hit's wrong fer to walk hin a man's sleep."

"Let me try my hand at the p'izen critter, boss!" pleaded Tanner.

"In good time, Ridge, but not just now. I reckon by morning Sparrow will be more in the mood for chirping a correct tune. I'll give him so much time; then, if he won't sing true, he must be made to sing, and you can try your skill as musical director."

Tom Penny drew the veteran aside for a brief space, whispering in guarded tones. Then Ridge Tanner returned, grasping the spy by the back of his neck, giving him a warning shake as he said:

"Pick up your hoofs, critter, an' foller yer nose! I'm goin' to show ye your sleepin' chamber; an' mind ye: when a critter gits to takin' a promenade in his sleep 'round this shebang, we wake him up with a dose o' blue pills! Jist b'ar that in mind, will ye?"

Tom Penny watched the veteran as he marched the captive away into the tunnel, then turned to Dutch Dan, who was yawning sleepily.

"You have done me still another service, my friend, for which I give you my thanks. That fellow was doubtless spying upon us here, and only for you he might have gained some dangerous information."

"Is dot so?" wondered the pilgrim, smothering another yawn. "Vhell, I vhas glat uff you vhas glat, und dot preaks der madder shordt off."

"Have it so, if you prefer; some other time I will finish up the thanks I owe you. And now, I trust you will not persist in your reckless notion of returning to town to-night?"

Dutch Dan thoughtfully rubbed his long chin as though weighing the matter, but his indecision did not last long. Another mighty yawn distended his jaws, and as soon as he could conquer this, he spoke:

"Vhell, I dinks me you vhas more rightt as I vhas. Gretchen vhas go schleepen long aheadt uff dis dime, I oxbects. Und maype I gouldn't vind her uff I do makes me dot Rough Ropin down py. Und dem grazzy mans who go valking drough dose nightts vhas too blendy vor my likens. Und I vhas crow awvl schleepy py my own selluf! Zo—maype I pedder vaits me undil dose sun gomes oop py der morning—eh?"

Tom Penny laughingly coincided with this view, and led the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg off to his own couch, where he left him to sleep.

As for himself, he had too much food for thought to think of repose.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ONE WAY TO WOO A MAIDEN.

With a swift stride Lee Kavanagh was be-

side that shrinking figure and grasping one arm as he mockingly cried:

"Really, Alcina, I am flattered! My conversation is so deeply interesting as to make an eavesdropper of you. Of such moment that you condescend to listen at a key-hole!"

"Unhand me, you villain!" panted the maiden, trying to break away from his brutal grasp, but only to be drawn still closer; only to be drawn into his arms.

Keefe Valder was stupefied for a brief space, but now he sprung to his feet, overturning his chair as he did so, his face flushing hotly, his tones full of anger and menace as he cried:

"Let her go, Kavanagh! How dare you—"

"Button up, will you?" flashing a fiery glance over his shoulder that caused the elder ruffian to stop and start back much as though he had received a heavy blow full in the face. "I'm running this outfit now, and you chip in only when I give the office. Try it before, and we'll have it out right now and here!"

He turned to Alcina, who had ceased her struggles to free herself, and stood pale, cold, haughty.

"As for you, my dear, your womanly curiosity has spared me the trouble of sending a messenger for you. I wanted to have a bit of a parley with you before leaving, and since you are here—come in and make yourself as comfortable as may be!"

"Father, will you stand there and let this ruffian insult me thus?"

"Pick up your chair and fill it with your corporosity, Valder," said Kavanagh, showing his teeth in a vicious smile that sent a cold chill vibrating along the backbone of his partner. "I've taken the bits between my teeth at last, and if you try to stop me, there'll be a gay old smash-up, sure as fate! You sabe pard? Then subside!"

Sharp and wicked came the last words, and Keefe Valder, cowed for the time being, sullenly returned to his seat.

Lee Kavanagh, still grasping the maiden with ruthless power, carried rather than led her over the threshold, closing and locking the door behind them. Then he placed her in a chair by the side of her parent, taking a seat directly opposite the twain.

"How much did you hear through the key-hole, Miss Valder?" he asked, leaning his arms on the table, a cold, ugly smile upon his face.

"Enough to brand you as the vilest villain unhung!" was the impetuous response, her blue eyes all aglow, her beautiful face flushing warmly with indignation and scorn.

"And your worthy parent—was there sufficient to clap a signet on his noble brow, as well?" mocked the ruffian, seeming to fully enjoy his power after having so long played a subordinate part.

Alcina flashed a look into the face of Keefe Valder, then bowed her head and covered her face with her trembling hands. Truly that was a night of trial for the poor woman!

"Drop it, you demon!" grated Valder, wrought to desperation by the sight of his grieving child and a knowledge of his own degradation in her eyes; for he loved her well, after his weak, wicked fashion.

"I'll drop you, my fine friend, if you try to cut up too rusty," significantly grated Kavanagh, placing a revolver on the table before him, but out of the other's reach. "As I said, I've taken the bit between my teeth at last, and I'll ride to victory or I'll end all in a grand smash-up trying! 'You've tried skim-milk long enough. Now I'm going to bring aqua-fortis into play!"

"First, with you, Alcina Valder," his tones growing softer, though under all lay an unyielding resolution that might well have frightened those who heard him speak just then. "I am glad that I caught you spying at the door, for—"

He stopped short as the maiden lifted her head, flashing a proudly indignant glance through her tears as he cried:

"I did listen—I admit it freely! I had a right to listen, as you were plotting evil against my promised husband—against the one man in all the world whom I love with pride!"

A quick glance at the pallid face of her parent pointed these last words. Keefe Valder uttered a low groan, but did not dare more than glance into her face. Just then he was tasting the bitter fruits of evil doing, and for a time he found it anything but pleasant, this knowledge that he had forever lost the respect of his only child.

"Meaning Tom Penny, I suppose?" drawled Kavanagh, though the swift clinching of his hands showed how her words stung him.

"Silence, you base villain!" flashed Alcina, with a gesture as if she would strike him in the face. "You are too vile to even pronounce his name—the name of an honest man—of my betrothed husband!"

"Which is where you make a mighty mistake, my dear. Tom Penny is not your betrothed. He never will be your husband. You are promised to another, and that other sits directly opposite your lovely self this moment! Am I not correct, Valder?"

Alcina shrunk back with a low cry that was

scarcely more than a gasp of bewildered pain. She looked at her father, but he avoided her eyes. And as Lee Kavanagh repeated his question, with vicious emphasis, the wretched father nodded his head in assent.

Sulkily, but quite sufficient to clear me of lying all by myself, anyway," laughed the black-faced villain. "And that lets me out, for even a lady of your remarkable pluck, Alcina, would hardly dare accuse your own daddy of deliberately lying. As for your listening, I make no bones about that. In fact I want you to listen yet a little longer, and not to put too fine a point upon it, you've got to listen!"

"Father, will you—"

"Father will, or take the consequences," curtly interposed Kavanagh, casting aside even his pretense of politeness from that moment. "Father will hold his peace, and only talk when I bid him. And even then his lips will shape the words I put into his mouth, or he and I will settle once for all which of us is to play master after this!"

Bitter hard words for a parent to listen to before his child, but Keefe Valder dared not attempt defiance. Never before had he realized how completely he had placed himself in the power of this merciless villain, and bad as all this was, he knew there was still worse behind.

Alcina seemed to realize much of this, for as her father studiously avoided her appealing, frightened gaze, she bowed her head and hid her pallid face in her trembling hands once more.

"That suits me better than if you were to insist in sharing my little talk, pretty one!" laughed Kavanagh, his jetty eyes all aglow. "Hide your eyes if it likes you, but pray keep your charming ears open."

"You have not forgotten how I avowed my love for you, or—"

"How I declined your offer!" flashed the maiden, quickly, lifting her head and dashing away the glittering tear-drops. "I would rather couple with a crawling, poison-puffed serpent than have aught in common with you, Lee Kavanagh!"

"Spirited and graphic, but hardly business, my dear," bowed the rascal, showing his teeth. "And it is business, pure and simple, from this moment on to the end! I love you. I wish to make you my wife. You have declined the honor, but that don't count. Your father has sworn to give me his daughter as part pay for the service I have rendered him, and between us two I reckon we can make the rifle in fine shape!"

"I will not listen to you any longer! And if my father—"

"Hold her in check, will you, Keefe Valder?" grated Kavanagh, viciously, as Alcina sprung to her feet. "Stop her until I have said my say out, or—you know what to expect!"

He himself never moved from his chair, though already Alcina was turning to leave the room. He glared at Keefe Valder—and with a gasping groan the speculator sprung up and arrested his daughter.

Alcina gave one look into that ghastly, convulsed face, then her head drooped upon his bosom and she knew the worst; knew that, father though he might be, he dared not aid her against this merciless rascal!

"Spare her—don't rub it in too deep, curse you, Lee Kavanagh!" hoarsely muttered the elder partner, a desperate glow filling his eyes.

"All right, if that suits you better, old cock!" with a hard and ugly laugh. "I'll give you the finale, and if it escapes her ears, you can sugar-coat the pill in your own good time."

"She is my property, and you know it. I have purchased her of you for a price—if you like, I'll whisper it in her shell-like ears! I mean to have my own, and that before either of us show many more gray hairs. But there is other work to do first, and while I am doing that, I look to you to keep my promised wife safe and sound. Lock her up in her own room if you prefer; only bear this in mind: if you can't turn her over to me when I'm ready for her, I'll take my pay out of your own hide! You sabe, Keefe Valder? Then—take her away and bring the key back with you, for I've got a few more words to whisper in your ears!"

"I'll go of my own accord," gasped Alcina, freeing herself and leaving the room, to be followed by her father, silently, doggedly.

She entered her chamber, and he turned the key in the lock.

CHAPTER XXV.

WORDS WITH THE BARK ON.

Thus far Keefe Valder had acted promptly enough, but now he perceptibly faltered. Alcina was safely in her room, the door closed and its key in his hand. Lee Kavanagh was waiting for him, but he was in no haste to return. For the first time he began to fully realize what a merciless taskmaster a fellow-criminal might easily become.

A dull, red glow came into his eyes, and he muttered sulkily:

"Look out, you devil! Don't try to drive me too far!"

And even as the words crossed his lips, a faint flush of shame stole into his face. Even as he threatened rebellion, he knew in his crime-

stained heart that he dared not come to an open rupture with Lee Kavanagh. The tool had grown to be the master!

It was a sense of this that at length urged him down-stairs and back to the room where the dark-faced schemer sat toying with a half-filled glass, waiting his coming. And it was with a strange, disagreeable sense of humiliation and even fear, that Keefe Valder crossed the threshold once more.

"You've taken your time about it, anyway!" sneered Kavanagh, his jetty eyes glittering with anything but a reassuring light as their gaze met for an instant.

Not more than that, for Valder drooped his lashes and passed along to his former seat, dropping heavily into it and pouring out a glass to the rim with liquor. This he lifted to his lips with a hand that visibly trembled, gulping the poison down as a man drinks who feels the aid of some such fiery stimulant.

In silence Lee Kavanagh watched him, that devilish smile showing his strong teeth, his eyes glittering more evilly than ever. One who saw them both then would have found little difficulty in deciding that the elder man was wholly in the power of his companion.

"You stayed long enough," repeated Kavanagh, as Valder replaced his glass upon the table; "but I'm not kicking about that, so long as you performed your work well. Which you did, of course?"

Keefe Valder slipped the key into his pocket with an abashed expression before answering:

"The poor child is in her room, if that's what you mean. And—curse it all!" with desperate energy, his hands clenching, his eyes shooting an ugly glance into that dark face from under their quivering lids. "You've tried to carry things with a mighty high hand, don't you think? If you think I'm going to stand any more such infernal—"

"Button up, will you?" was the cold, stern interposition. "You've had your innings, and a beautiful set of muffs you have placed on record against us, too! It's my turn now; and I'm going to win the game or break something more than the record in trying!"

Not so much the words, but the manner in which they were spoken, cowed the short-lived courage of the speculator. With all his pomposity, his grand air, his "high and mighty way," Keefe Valder was, after all, far better fitted to follow than to lead, even in rascality.

Lee Kavanagh settled himself in his seat like a man who feels he has a serious duty to perform, yet who has ample time in which to bring it off. It was plain to be seen that he meant to talk business without spoiling measures for mere politeness without content to leave the worst to the man who listened; for himself, he would be as near comfortable as the circumstances would permit.

He filled his glass and left it standing close to his elbow. He lit a cigar, puffing away until it was fairly burning. Then, with rude directness he spoke again:

"It's time you and I came to a full understanding, old fellow, and as I can't do much outside until the break of day, just prick up your ears and listen, will you?"

"I've listened to too much already!" growled Valder, feebly struggling against his master. "Curse you, Lee Kavanagh! couldn't you let the poor girl alone?"

"My wife that is to be?" with a mocking bow. "Do you reckon she heard anything worse on this side of the door than she did while listening at the other side? But that don't count. Sooner or later she had to learn the truth, and I chose to make it earlier. And when I say one thing, it will hardly be healthy for you to say the opposite. Your turn has passed, and it's my rule for a bit, dear fellow!"

There was something so horribly insolent in both tone and manner as he rung the changes on this point, that Keefe Valder turned sick within him, longing yet afraid to openly defy the mocking villain. For once in his life he was finding the fruits of sin bitter enough!

"As part of that rule," with a sip at his glass, "there's got to be a complete dropping of pretence about Tom Penny, so far as Ally is concerned. You've got to make her understand that whatever might have come of that business in the old state, she has nothing to expect from that quarter now. You must make her understand that she is mine, to deal with as I see fit. You must bring her around; must make her see that it is worse than folly for her to keep kicking against the pricks. In one word, Valder, you've got to force her to look upon me as her future lord and master!"

"There's time enough—" feebly began the elder man, only to be rudely cut short by his partner.

"I'm the best judge of that. I say there is no time to lose. I say if we win the game at all, we've got to do it in a rush! I've let you have your own way until the cat is almost dead, and now I'm going to kill or cure the animal!"

Little by little Keefe Valder was waxing more desperate. Twice since returning to the room he had emptied a full glass of the strong liquor, and its effects were beginning to show in his face and voice.

He had ruled so long. Lee Kavanagh, the more surely to gain his coveted ends, had submitted so quietly for months past, yielding to his judgment almost without a question, that it was difficult for him to wholly realize this startling alteration in tone and manner. And as the fumes of whisky flew to his own brain, he began to attribute that change to drunkenness.

"It'll be kill, then!" he flashed out, viciously, striking the table heavily with his clinched fist. "Curse you for a drunken upstart! who are you to crow so loud over me? Who are you to say I must do this, and I mustn't do that? And as for Alcina—ring in her name again, and I'll kick you clear of the house, though it kills me the next moment!"

"The mere trying would kill you, let alone the doing," laughed Lee Kavanagh harshly as he drew the decanter away from his partner. "You are getting drunk a wee bit too fast, old fellow, and—"

"Who pays for the whisky? What is it to you if—"

Then the vast difference between the partners was exemplified.

Keefe Valder rose to his feet with a rare air of bluster. Lee Kavanagh rose with the swift liteness of an enraged panther. His sinewy hands clutched the speculator by the throat, giving him one vicious shake that fairly drove the breath out of his body, then planted him in his chair with a force that shook the building. And standing before the flushed, gasping man, he shook a white finger in his face as he said:

"Business, Keefe Valder! You keep your seat. You listen to what I'm telling you, and cork it up in your brain to simmer until your sluggish wits can make sense out of it. For the time has come when you and I must have a full understanding with each other."

He returned to his chair, leaning partly on the table, his black eyes holding Valder as under a spell. Sharp and distinct came his words. And dulled, stupefied though Keefe Valder was, just then, he could not help understanding.

"I've let you run the length of your rope, old man, partly because I was not quite ready to act for us both, but mainly because I wanted to get you so badly tangled up in your own coils that you couldn't get free again without my aid. You're in the snarl, now, and I'm taking the deal into my own hands."

"You've got to coax, reason or scare Alcina into becoming my wife. You have already pledged me your word of honor that she should be my wife, but that, of course, don't count. You never intended keeping that pledge, and I knew it full well, even as I thanked you for giving it."

"Even now I wouldn't trust you, only I know you can't help yourself. If you are idiot enough to refuse; if you are mad enough to back the girl in refusing me; I'll jump the game and let you reap the consequence! And more than that; if necessary I'll put a spoke in the wheel to help it go round!"

"You are too near drunk to realize how perfectly easy all this would be for me to do, but you'll soon sober off enough to realize what it means, when I've once given you the clew to chew upon."

"Suppose we play quits from this night on; what would be the result? Tom Penny would defy you, just as he defied us both from the first move you made in the game. And when I turned the old man loose, as I swear solemnly I will do, unless you come to terms with—"

"Then you lied! He isn't at the mine!" interposed Keefe Valder, with a flash of spirit mixed with intense relief.

"If he is free, of course my job will be all the easier," laughed Kavanagh, in no wise put out by that slip of the tongue. "I meant if this pretended Dutchman wasn't our game, of course; but let me finish."

"Whatever he may suspect, up to this hour Gregor McGregor knows naught against me; he has never seen my face, never heard my undisguised voice; he only knows me as 'Captain Bluebeard!' But he knows you. He knows that you have acted as principal in this bold game, and that it was by your orders that he wrote that note or order, under torture, bidding Tom Penny turn the Scottish Chief property over to you."

"And if worst comes to worst, I can prove positively that you committed forgery in preparing that patent and—does that nip you?"

Keefe Valder shrunk back in his chair, ghastly pale, the picture of broken-down nerve. For one breath Lee Kavanagh triumphed over him, then abruptly changed in voice, face and manner.

"I could do all this, but I'd far rather have you for a friend than an enemy, Valder. Together, we'll win the game; apart, I might have plenty of revenge, but the wealth would vanish into thin air! Say that you will do your level best to keep your pledge given me; say that you will bring the girl around to look at her marriage with me as the best thing she can do; and I'll never give you such a rocky racket again!"

"I'll do my level best," muttered Valder, huskily, seemingly clean broken down by a stronger will.

"That's all right, then," nodded Kavanagh,

smiling brightly as he pushed the decanter across the table after filling his own glass. "Try another hair, only don't let it bite you too deeply, old friend. Remember you've got to make a call on this Dutch girl, and if you get the best of the bargain, you've got to tackle it with a clear brain and unfogged wits. If not—I'm open to bet evens that the little witch will haul you before a gospel sharp and marry you out of hand!"

Keefe Valder made no response, though it was plain enough that he had little fancy for the task assigned him. Kavanagh saw this, and his old gravity returned.

"It's not to be done, Valder, and I've other work on hand. Whoever this Dutch Dan may turn out to be, the girl is playing in with him. If he is really the old Sawney broke loose, we can manage him better with his petticoated pard in our hands. If not—well, through her we can find out just who and what he is, as well as what object brought him to Rough Robin."

"I'll do my best, of course," muttered Valder.

"If she is nothing more than she seems, we can put her to good use as a neat guard upon Ally, you know!" with a quick ugly gleam in his jetty eyes. "And now I'll be tramping back to the hotel and get all ready for a run over the hills to the den. If I find the old man still in limbo, I'll not linger long before bringing word back to you. And if he is there—then I'll drop a grip on this precious Dutch Dan, and show you an easy way out of the woods! For, if handled rightly, I'm open to bet big odds Tom Penny will pass over the Scottish Chief to us inside of three days from date!"

"How? I don't understand!" ejaculated the startled partner.

But Lee Kavanagh simply laughed as he rose and left the house.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHO, THEN, IS DUTCH DAN?

TRUE to his word, the sun had not yet risen on Rough Robin when Lee Kavanagh rode briskly out of town, mounted on a spirited horse, bent on deciding the important question whether or no Gregor McGregor had managed to escape from the ruffians placed to guard him like some precious jewel of vast price.

Reckless and strong-nerved though he undeniably was, Lee Kavanagh looked haggard and much paler than usual as he drew clear of the lively little mining-town. It was a bold and reckless game he was playing, and he began to show the effects of it.

The game would have been difficult enough at the best, but it was rendered doubly so through his wish to get Keefe Valder completely in his power, while at the same time covering his own tracks.

Briefly stated, the case stood thus:

Gregor McGregor was sole owner of a mine which had recently proved far more valuable than any one had any idea of, up to the day a new body of rich ore was struck by the miners.

The owner, "a canny Scot," lived at Kansas City, Mo. He placed the management of all his property at Rough Robin in the hands of Thomas Penny, the son of an old friend and countryman, having thorough confidence in his honor and fidelity.

Gregor McGregor had never visited Rough Robin up to the period treated of in this recital, seeming well satisfied with the regular reports sent in by his manager.

Through one of the miners employed by Tom Penny, Lee Kavanagh learned of this "bonanza," almost as soon as it was struck, and being even then a rival claimant for the hand of Alcina Valder, the adventurer resolved on making a bold stroke for a fortune and a bride.

He easily won over Keefe Valder to his views, and between them a promising scheme was quickly decided upon. A note was written to the owner of the mine, plainly charging Tom Penny with double dealing; with richly feathering his nest from the mine, and adding that he was rapidly falling into the hands of gamblers who bade fair to strip him clean.

Lee Kavanagh took a flying trip to Kansas City and made a close study of the Scotchman, finding him much what he expected, a cold, hard, yet suspicious man of business; and on the knowledge thus gained, that letter was written. It performed the work expected of it, and without a word of warning to Tom Penny, Gregor McGregor started for Rough Robin to see for himself how matters were working.

Lee Kavanagh was a passenger with McGregor for the last few stages, and, guided by his signals, the coach was "held up" and Gregor McGregor kidnapped. He and Kavanagh were the only passengers, and the driver was easily silenced by a handful of gold. So it came about that no report reached Rough Robin of the adventure.

The kidnappers took McGregor to a place selected for the purpose, where Kavanagh, thoroughly disguised, and calling himself "Captain Bluebeard," soon after paid him a visit, paving the way for the demand which soon followed: that he sign over all his claims and rights to the

Scottish Chief, in return for his life and freedom.

Whether it was that McGregor suspected the truth; whether he felt assured that in case he did sign away his property to these bold plotters, he would be murdered to keep their outrage a secret; certain it is that he obstinately refused to fall in with their plans, though they brought stern torture to bear upon him.

He knew now that Tom Penny had been calumniated, and when he was driven to a corner, and given to understand that he must yield or die, he pretended to obey, but making a secret mark on the order, which he knew would surely place his manager on his guard.

With these documents in their hands, it seemed strange that the schemers had not called force to their aid to uphold their pretended rights, but this they were reluctant to do while a milder method remained. Fully one-half of the citizens of Rough Robin were friendly to Tom Penny, and directly opposed to the Valder-Kavanagh clan. It was bluntly given forth that no force should be employed, under penalty of a fractional fight, in which law and order would be allied against the ones who sought to gain their ends by brute force.

"Appeal to the law; give your papers into the hands of the sheriff or deputy marshal, and we'll back you up. Try to jump the claim, and you've got to sweep us out of the way first."

Thus the better class of citizens spoke, guided in this by the reply of Tom Penny. He was willing to turn the property over to the agents of the law, and abide by the decision thus given. Then Gregor McGregor would be brought to give evidence, which was all he asked for. But until then, he would perform his duty, and fight to the bitter end against all who tried to depose him.

If the plotters could gain possession of the property, they would willingly leave everything to be decided by the law, relying on their extorted documents to uphold their claims when Gregor McGregor failed to put in an appearance; but they dared not do this while the enemy still held possession.

This will explain why Keefe Valder invited Tom Penny to visit him that day, and why he brought Alcina to have a parting interview with the man who loved her, even as she loved him. That love was counted on to break down the guardian of the mine; but he was made of sterner stuff than either of the schemers believed.

All of this went flashing rapidly through the brain of Lee Kavanagh as he rode rapidly away from Rough Robin, leaving the stage trail and plunging deeper into the hills, making good time toward the "den" where he had left Gregor McGregor under strict guard until the time came for finally disposing of him, once for all.

"If the old rascal is still there—and I can hardly hope it—I'll freeze fast to Dutch Dan and try if I can't transform him into the man he looks so mightily like! If I can—if he can drop that outlandish brogue long enough—I'll make him kick Tom Penny over the garden wall, and step into his shoes myself.

"If not—if the old fellow has skipped and is playing a part down yonder—I'll bunch the boys by dark and run the racket with a rush! I'll carry the place by storm, and then bluff my way through, or make a glorious ending! If I fail, I'll leave the country something to talk about, anyway!"

Several hours of brisk riding carried Lee Kavanagh to a point as near the den as he could conveniently get on horseback, and securing the panting creature in a secluded spot, he hastened along on foot, leaping and bounding from crag to crag as sure-footed as a mountain goat.

He paused only when a peculiar whistle—which sounded far more like the thrill of a wild bird than aught coming from human lungs—came to his ears, and then only long enough to reveal his identity to the watchful sentry who kept guard over "the den," in a snug covert where his presence would never have been suspected so long as he kept from wittingly exposing himself.

"All right, boss," was the response to the word and signal which Lee Kavanagh made before resuming his swift advance. "Knewed it was you, safe enough, but orders is orders, an' I had to live up to 'em!"

"How is the old gent?" asked Kavanagh, his keen eyes fixed on the face of the sentry as he uttered the words, trying to read the truth there in advance. "Nothing has happened out of the way, I hope?"

"Not as I knows on," was the prompt response. "I hain't see'd the critter with the own eyes o' me, but of course he's O. K., or the boys would 'a' kicked up a bobbery in a hurry!"

Lee Kavanagh said no more, but pushed on past the sentinel, parting a mass of foliage and stooping to enter a dark, damp-smelling hole in the rocks. Even yet he could not bring himself to believe that Gregor McGregor had not effected his escape, though how this could have come about without the man on duty knowing of it, puzzled him to explain.

"Satan pity 'em if he is gone!" he grated

under his breath as he pressed on through the low, narrow entrance, soon after emerging into a fairly large rock-chamber, dimly lighted up by a couple of candles stuck on rock points by their own grease. "Hallo, Mordaunt!"

A burly figure sprang up from a pile of blankets in one dark corner, with an exclamation of sleepy surprise.

"It's you? Durned ef it ain't, now!" he spluttered, advancing with a broad grin on his ugly face. "Ef you've got a drap o' p'izen, cap'n, fer the love o' humanity let me jest smell o' the outside! Ourn is all played, an' I'm too dry to chirp, even!"

"How goes it with the old codger?"

"Jest the same old way; gruntin' an' cussin' like bricks! But ef you've got a—durned ef you hain't jes' boss, cap'n!" he grinned as Kavanagh handed him a whisky flask, passing briskly past him to hastily don an effectual disguise which hung against the rock wall.

Surely all was right? Surely Mordaunt would not meet him thus if he had lost his precious charge? Then—who was Dutch Dan? What sort of game was he playing down in Rough Robin? How came he with the face and figure of Gregor McGregor?

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MERCILESS CAPTOR.

AN important part of the disguise donned by Lee Kavanagh before venturing into the presence of his captive, consisted of a wig and full beard combined, formed of a grizzly, grayish blue tangle of hair which no doubt had suggested to him the choice of "Captain Bluebeard" as a name under which he might as well masquerade.

In addition to this, he secured a small pad between his shoulders, and by persistently stooping his erect figure he gave the impression of being a full head shorter, even without taking his humpback into consideration.

Donning these with a rapidity that told of practice, combing the shaggy hair down to his eyes with his fingers, Lee Kavanagh took one of the lighted candles and left the rock-chamber by way of a narrow, cleft-like passage deeper into the heart of the hill. The passage was not long, though making several sharp curves, and in a very few moments he entered another cavity in the rock, much smaller and damper than the outer chamber.

Yet, small as the hole was, the feeble rays of the candle did not readily conquer the darkness therein, and eagerly as Lee Kavanagh peered into the corners, holding the candle above his head in order to gain the full benefit of its uncertain rays, it was fully half a minute before he lost the last of his haunting fears.

Then he distinguished a human figure half lying, half sitting on a ragged blanket near the rough wall; a face gaunt and bony, showing almost corpse-like in that faint light; but with eyes that glowed and sparkled with mingled hatred and obstinacy.

"Have you come to beg my pardon for your fiendish brutality, you merciless demon?" the captive spoke, his voice harsh and even menacing as their gaze met.

The words sounded strange enough, coming from his lips, and the laugh which Lee Kavanagh gave was forced and unnatural. Even now he hardly knew how to take this man. From the first hour of his capture he had proved an enigma very hard to comprehend.

"I've come to bring you news; whether good or bad I'll leave you to decide after we've had a little time to talk it over," he retorted, as he crossed the damp den and stuck the candle on a projecting spur of rock by dropping a little melted grease from the light itself.

"If hard lying can do it, be sure you'll twist the truth into good for you and bad for me, you rascal!"

Used as he was to this sort of blunt language, just now it seemed to cut Lee Kavanagh to the quick, for he wheeled upon the captive with a vicious snarl through his tangled beard as he grated:

"Button your lip, old fool, unless you want me to shorten that foul tongue of yours by an inch or two! A very little of that sort of guff goes a mighty long ways after it begins to lose its freshness!"

"Now I know the news is favorable—to me!" laughed the captive, seemingly unmoved by the threat. "As long as you kept purring, I had scant hope; but now you've taking to snarling instead, I begin to see light ahead!"

With an effort Kavanagh managed to control his fiery temper, and even forced a laugh at this shrewd reasoning. This was no ordinary man, and though he felt that the game lay in his own hands, safe enough, there could be nothing lost by playing each card with care and precision.

"The light of liberty—who knows?" he said, squatting on his heels opposite the captive, supporting his bent back against the rock wall. "And as for asking pardon for aught I have done to you, even that is not so mightily out of the way. I have called to thank you for the kind and generous introduction you gave me to your manager. It has brought about a perfect understanding between us. It has smoothed away the last obstructing mole-hill. And as the

very least I could do, here I am to thank you and beg forgiveness for my past doubts!"

"All of which means—what?" coldly asked the prisoner.

"That Tom Penny has turned the Scottish Chief property over to its new owners, and shaken the dust of Rough Robin from his feet forever!" laughed the disguised villain, seemingly hugely delighted.

"Which, briefly interpreted, means *you lie*."

Harsh, contemptuous, unhesitatingly came the words. There was no pretense in them. Gregor McGregor plainly believed just what he said.

"You are complimentary, my dear fellow," laughed Kavanagh, his eyes glowing redly in that dim light. "What makes you think I am speaking falsely?"

"I don't think; I know," was the cold retort. "Thomas Penny is a true man, even as his fathers were before him. He swore he would prove faithful to the trust I reposed in him, and his word is his bond. While a breath of life remains in his body, he will keep faith with me!"

"But, surely, my dear fellow, you forget how plainly you bade him turn all the property in his hands over to us."

"I forget nothing. I know that you have run up against some sort of a snag, else you would not be here with soft words upon your evil tongue. I know that there is something crooked—"

"On my part or on yours?" interposed Kavanagh, with a vicious click of his strong teeth, his eyes glowing still more vividly.

"Can there be any question as to that?" with a grim smile lighting up his gaunt, hard features. "What can I do, bound hand and foot as though I were guilty of half your crimes?"

"Well, for instance, you could place a wrong sign on that order bidding Tom Penny transfer the mine property to us—you infernal rascal!" casting aside all pretense as he recalled how thoroughly he had been tricked by the man whose life he held at his mercy. "What did you hope to gain by such a clumsy trick as that?"

"A wee bit of satisfaction—the pleasure of fooling you, Sir Road-Agent!" chuckled McGregor. "Ay, man! bound and helpless though my body has been all these hours, my mind has been free to follow after and mark the rage and mortification that surely covered ye as with a wet blanket when ye gave honest Tom Penny a bit screed that flatly countermanded the words ye spokel Poor triumph, ye think, mayhap; but half a loaf is ahead of no bread, ye ken! At least I've the comfort of knowing ye'll be none the richer for my peumanship!"

Lee Kavanagh made no attempt to check the speech of his captive. He needed the delay to complete his self-victory. Unless he could control his own will, how could he hope to break down that of this stubborn captive?

"I'm glad you can take so cheerful a view of it, McGregor," he said, his tones cold, hard and merciless in the extreme. "It may help you to bear up under the consequences which surely must follow such a practical joke. For, of course, you can't expect us to rest content with matters as they now stand?"

"I've known from the first that I had naught but evil to expect from ye, man," grimly retorted the prisoner. "I knew that by the rare amount of lying ye saw fit to do while trying to throw dust in my eyes. I knew ye would take care I never had a chance to come back at ye for revenge after ye'd won the mine: but ye haven't won it yet, man!"

"Because we wanted to let you off as easy as might be," nodded Kavanagh, his eyes glowing redly through the gloom. "But all that is past and gone. From this day on it is pure business with us, and if we can't bend, we'll break you!"

"Maybe ye'll find that not so easy!"

"Anything is easy if one gets about it after a proper fashion," laughed Kavanagh, viciously. "As I said, you've got to bend or break, for we've gone too far to even think of stopping short or turning back a step. We'll give you another chance to save yourself by bending. You must write another order to Tom Penny, directing him to turn all the property in his charge over to the bearer, keeping your letter as his authority. You must add to that order the correct signal this time."

"If I should happen to make another mistake?"

"You will hardly do that. Or, if you do, it will be corrected before the bit of paper leaves this palace," coldly retorted Kavanagh.

"So ye say, man, but whese to prove it?" dryly commented McGregor. "Ther's only two pair o' eyes that ken's the wrang fra the true: Honest Tam's over yonder, and these twa in my ain heid! And the last, I'm fearin', are beginning to fail for lack o' clear sunlight! They may even mak' the same mistake o'er again, ye see!"

Only his falling into dialect showed that Gregor McGregor was at all excited. His voice was hard and even as ever. His gaunt, leathern visage was hard and emotionless as though a mask of stone.

But Lee Kavanagh drew some consolation from that faint betrayal. It was the first sign of weakness which he had been able to discover

in this obstinate captive since first he fell into his merciless grip.

"What I say now goes as it lays, old fellows," he added, coldly. "I think I know how to brush the dust from your eyes, without taking you into the full glare of the noonday sun. I rather hope you will not compel me to make use of the recipe, for your own sake. It does clear the patient's vision most marvelously, but the reaction is apt to prove fatal to any one who hasn't the constitution of a horse; and, really, you begin to show the effects of close confinement! I would almost bet odds you never rally from the effects of my little dose!"

"Then I'll sink under it, and ye'll be none the better off for my bit secret, ye malevolent devil!" grimly frowned McGregor.

"You don't give me credit for half I can do, or you'd never indulge in such a ridiculous hope as that," laughed Kavanagh, rising to his feet, adding more rapidly: "I've gone into this game to win, and win I shall if there's any virtue in torments! Stubborn and obstinate as you are, old man, I'll break down your will and force the truth out of you in the end! Every minute you hold out, will be worse than death when I once begin putting the question! Every second will contain torture enough to outweigh a solid pound of gold! And after you have endured a few hours—or say *days*, for when I'm bent on gaining a point, I never stop to count the time it takes to win!—you'll be only too glad to strip yourself of all else, just for one breath of relief!"

He paused as though to give Gregor McGregor a chance to reply, but the captive maintained silence. His hard, gaunt features were sternly set, showing not the faintest trace of yielding. And Lee Kavanagh felt that in all his evil experience he had never met a less promising subject for bending through bodily fear or pain.

Still, he showed nothing of this outwardly. He spoke coldly, confidently enough, as though victory was but a question of time.

"Why do I take the trouble to come here and tell you all this?" he added. "Simply that you may have time to collect your powers of resistance. I would not give a finger-snap to triumph over a weakling; but breaking *your* will will be something to crow over!"

"And now, as for the effect that false order had on Tom Penny, though I regret having to somewhat dim your high ideal of that worthy young gentleman. You may or you may not be aware that Penny is over head and ears in love with a charming young lady. Still, it is the simple truth. And it is also true that he has been given the alternative of holding out and losing her forever, or yielding and plucking her to his bosom as a glorious prize. He still holds out, as you guessed from my coming to call upon you so soon. But he has asked for four-and-twenty hours in which to weigh the matter in his mind, promising to give us a positive answer at the expiration of that time; which will be a little before sunset, this day."

"That he hesitated at all, is scarcely a favorable omen for you, my dear fellow. Tom is young, and his blood is hot. The lady is unusually lovely in face, person and disposition. She has begged Tom not to ruin the happiness of both for life, simply through a silly belief that you really meant that secret sign you added to the order; for of course you made an error, and intended to put the direct opposite on record."

"Ye'll never get him to believe that!" frowned the prisoner.

"Then we'll take possession by force of arms, backed by your order and the patent. And then—to keep you from ever denying the transfer was fully and freely made, for ample consideration received—we'll be under the disagreeable necessity of putting you to sleep—in *death*!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BACK TO ROUGH ROBIN.

THE gray light of a new day was just showing over the hills to the east, when Tom Penny rose from the rude couch on which he had passed the last few hours—not sleeping, if the truth must be told.

He had too much to think of, too much to ponder over and try to untangle, for repose, worn and weary though he must have been in body.

Not a little of his silent musings had been given to the proper disposal of English Sparrow. A decision would have been more difficult to arrive at, perhaps, only for the fact that he held two of the ruffians who had been engaged in that attempted kidnapping. He could gain all the information he required from them, and much more readily than from the lips of the human shadow, whose very dread of Lee Kavanagh would make him almost proof against torture.

A word to Ridge Tanner was sufficient to set that worthy to work, and half an hour later a warm meal was prepared to which both Dutch Dan and English Sparrow were invited by Tom Penny.

The Pilgrim from Spitzenberg ate freely, almost ravenously, but the crestfallen spy was far less at his ease. Knowing the part he had played against the men who coldly, gravely stood by, he hardly expected any mercy would be shown him.

The mine-manager seemed in no particular haste to relieve this evident anxiety on his prisoner's part, but whispered occasionally with Ridge Tanner, whose weather-beaten countenance gradually changed from grim acerbity to broad levity. Knowing as he did how little the veteran loved him, this alteration by no means delighted English Sparrow.

"Dot vhas der piggest plow-oudt I roons me shuck ub ag'inst vor more dimes as I know me how to count!" said Dutch Dan, with a mighty breath of satisfaction and satiety combined as he felt for his pipe and tobacco. "I dinks me dot I likes to vindt poard mit you vellers, uff you a dable sets all der dime like dose—yaw!"

"The longer you'll stay with us, the better I'll be pleased," said Tom Penny, with frank earnestness.

He had banished his belief that Dutch Dan was other than he appeared on the face of it, but he could not so readily forget that only for his heavy fists and mighty strength, he would now be dead or helplessly in the power of his merciless foes.

"Bud Gretchen?" dubiously muttered the pilgrim, shaking his head as he glanced around at the mine-defenders. "How makes dot when she cooms? *Nein, nein!* Dere vhas dwo blendy mans py dis vor dot! I keeps me hot vater in all der dimes making dot vhimmens kvit vinking py dose vellers—I know me dot vor sure! Und so—pedder I says me goot-py, und makes me dravel dot Rough Robin down py!"

"Of course we can't keep you if you prefer to go, but I wish you would think better of it, my friend," gravely responded Penny. "I fear me you'll find more trouble there to-day than befell you yesterday. The rascals who carry your sign-manual on their faces will be mighty apt to try to even-up their scores at your expense."

"Uff dey does, den dot's so mooch der vorse vor dem," coolly retorted the pilgrim. "I vinds me oudt I vhas a b-a-t m-a-n und a vigher rightt away kvick foon Baddle Grick! Dose vellers makes me droobles oudt, und I sdarts me a brivate grafeyardt all py myselluff!"

"If you are bent on going, give this note to the first man you meet in town," handing him a ready prepared letter to a friend. "That will insure you fair play in case of trouble, though I trust you will meet with none such. And now," turning to English Robin, "a word or two with you, my little rascal!"

"I know you were at the head of that little rumpus last night, down the trail, and I would be fully justified in stringing you up by the neck to scare the crows with."

"So 'lp me, cap'n, hif H'I hever—"

"Button up! Lying couldn't save you, if I hadn't other uses to put you to. And then, you were only obeying orders, after all. Lee Kavanagh was at the bottom of it all, and until I've punished him, it would be hardly fair to make examples of his slaves."

"Now, Sparrow, I'm going to send you back to Rough Robin, to tell your master that it's black war between him and me, from this hour on!"

"H'I'll tell 'im beverythink, cap'n!" mumbled the spy, trembling with new-born hope.

"I know you will," was the quiet retort. "Rig him out, Tanner!"

The spy's hands had been cast loose in order to feed himself, but now they were twisted behind his back by the grinning veteran and firmly bound there, at elbows and at wrists. A short rope was formed into a loop, the noose drawn loosely about his throat, the end hanging down behind. And then a smooth shingle was fastened between his shoulders at his back, bearing several words in staring lampblack.

"You'll need your feet to carry you into town, Sparrow, so we'll grant you that much liberty," said Penny, smiling grimly at the ludicrous spectacle thus presented. "You will go direct to Lee Kavanagh, and make your report. When that is off your mind, add this from me: 'Tell your master that I send him this rope to hang himself, hoping he will use it thus, and save me the trouble of playing executioner. Tell him that the next time he wishes to capture me, to head his rascals in person, if he loves me! And when you grow weary of wearing this bit of a sign-board, beg him to relieve you of it, for what fits one will apply just as well to the other.'"

"Vhell, vbell, dot makes a boody show!" ejaculated Dutch Dan, holding up his hands in admiration as he slowly circled around the unhappy spy, pausing long enough to read the boldly printed words on the board. "*Sby! Dief! Kitnabber! Double-ass-in! Py cracious mercy!*"

Tom Penny led the wretched spy to the gate, opening it and sending him well on his way with a masterful kick! "Uff he dakes him a nodion vor maken hite in dem voods py himselluff, how vhas dot shoke coom oudt, I likes me to know me dot?" doubtfully suggested the pilgrim, then before an answer could be given, a broad smile illumined his leathery visage and one finger wert up alongside his nose as he added: "Maype I vools dot Sbarrow foon England! Maype I makes him

keeb dot roadt straightt away in all der vholes! Uff I don't, shoost gall me a shack-mule, my ferry goot friends!"

And before a word could be uttered or a hand raised to check him, Dutch Dan strode swiftly away in pursuit of English Sparrow, who was making rapid progress, plainly thinking only of putting as long a distance as possible between his aching person and that heavy boot!

"He's nobody's fool, ef he does try mighty hard to make out like he was!" grinned Ridge Tanner, rubbing his horny hands until they grated on the ear. "He'll keep Sparrow goin' straight, an'—ef I was *only* in town to see the fun!"

Ridge Tanner was correct in his judgment. Dutch Dan held a grudge against the malicious little rascal, and the moment English Sparrow tried to leave the trail, intending either to rid himself of rope and placard if possible, or else lie low until the shades of night could lend him a grateful shield, his bony fingers closed on the trailing rope and brought the fellow up with a round turn.

"Py shings! you vhas der mosdt vorgetvulness vheeler I effer me roon agross, Sbarrow!" he cried, indignantly, as he set the miserable rascal straight in his course and gently urged him on with the toe of a brogan. "Vouldt you make all dose droobles go py nodding? Vouldt you spoil dose shokes like dot? Didn't you got no zense uff foon py dot gargass anyway? Valkest dou in der sdraight vay, uff you don't vant von uff dem hills to dumble all cafer you in a boory, now!"

"But I *can't* go bin town lookink like this, don't ye know?" groaned the miserable rascal, as plainly as that twitching rope would permit.

"Vhell, I pets me you *gan* do dot, Sbarrow, uff you makes a pig dry vor id; und I vhas hellup you oudt all I knows me how," cheerfully responded Dutch Dan, slinging his pack over his shoulder, holding the end of the rope in one hand and plucking a lithe switch with the other as he urged the captive along the rocky trail. "Uff your sbirids go blay oudt too kvick, I vaken dem oop like dot—eh?"

English Sparrow gave a howl of angry pain as he leaped into the air, for a smart stroke from Dutch Dan sent the limber switch curling around his legs in anything but a soothing fashion.

"You devil! H'I'll murder you for this!" he howled, venomously, but keeping as far in advance of the pilgrim as the length of the rope would permit.

"Vhell, uff you vill, you vill, und I makes me eafen pevorehandt!"

And Dutch Dan seemed resolved to make his words come true, too! He spurred his balky horse freely, sending him capering along the rocky trail to Rough Robin, never permitting him to rest, giving him no chance to break away or to rid himself of that painted placard.

And after this fashion they entered Rough Robin, fortunately for English Sparrow by a comparatively unfrequented street, for almost before any one noticed their arrival in such queer shape, Dutch Dan gave a wild howl of mingled anger and disgust.

Just ahead of them was Gretchen Stauffer, leaning coyly on the arm of a portly, well-dressed gentleman, smiling sweetly up into his face.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GRETCHEN ACCEPTS A PROPOSAL.

KEEFE VALDER was yet another one who profited but little from rest or sleep that night.

He followed Lee Kavanagh to the outer door, with a vague idea of forcing an answer from his lips plainer than the mocking laugh with which he left the room, but though the younger partner turned when over the threshold to make an elaborate bow, the words he sought would not come to his lips. He stared after the swiftly moving figure until it was swallowed up by the shadows, then closed and fastened the door.

He paused irresolutely in the entry, casting a troubled look up the stairs where he had left his only child under lock and key. For a brief space he was powerfully tempted to set her free again; to take her and flee from Rough Robin forever!

"Too late! Too late!" he muttered, with a nervous shiver at the barely audible sound of his own words. "Alone he might let me go, but never with her—never with my poor little girl!"

He turned and passed into the room in which Lee Kavanagh had finally cast aside the mask he had worn so long, dropping into a chair, and with unsteady hands pouring out a glass of whisky. A portion of this was spilled by his unsteadiness as he raised the glass from the table, and checking his hand midway, Keefe Valder stared at the poison for a few seconds, then, with sudden passion he hurled glass and all across the room, crashing through the window at the further end of the apartment.

"No more—never again until I've won back my manhood! Never again until I've met and crushed that grinning devil under my feet as he has trampled on me this night!" he hoarsely muttered, his dark eyes glowing redly, his face convulsed with savage rage and shame.

If this had only lasted! But it did not. Even as the crash and jingle of the broken glass came to his ears, Keefe Valder started and looked around with a frightened expression driving the rage from his face.

Little by little Lee Kavanagh had gained ascendancy over him, yet masking the truth so adroitly that up to the very instant when the explosion came, his partner was wholly ignorant of the full truth. Until then he believed himself, what Kavanagh pretended, the head and chief of the firm, and the one who was to profit most richly by their boldly-conceived game.

He knew better, now. The scales had been torn from his eyes with a merciless hand, and he began to see how blindly he had been driven instead of leading, as he supposed.

Sitting there, that night, Keefe Valder forced himself to review it all, trying to see how he could retrieve himself without bringing complete ruin upon himself, but he was forced to admit that he could see scant hopes of doing this. He had gone too far to retreat, or even to stand still, if he hoped to ever hold his head up in Rough Robin as he had during the past. It was as Kavanagh said: they must rule or ruin.

"He is a merciless devil, and I begin to know him at last! He'd kick all to ruin in one of his reckless fits, if I try to hold him in the traces! What, then, can I do?"

As he sat there through the waning night, it did occur to him to throw up the evil game he was playing; but only for a few gloomy minutes. The longer he weighed the matter, the fainter grew this temptation. At best it had a foundation only on a vicious longing to "get even" with Lee Kavanagh for the humiliation he, himself, had suffered.

To pause now would be to admit what Tom Penny and his friends in town had all along declared; would convict him of foul play sufficient to make an outcast of him from that day on, even were he lucky enough to escape more practical punishment.

And as he thought on and on, the lesson read him by Lee Kavanagh sunk deeper into his mind. Bit by bit his angry courage was leaving him. Little by little he was coming to change positions with his partner, and reconcile himself to follow instead of lead, lest still worse befall him.

The gray dawn found him still sitting at the table, his face pale and worn, his eyes red and heavy-lidded; but there was a glass of whisky in his hands, half emptied!

With the rising of the sun, the old woman who served them came back from her home, to which Keefe Valder, moved by Lee Kavanagh, had given her leave to visit for the night, and bustled about preparing the morning meal. And when she came to the door to announce this, Valder bade her fill a tray with viands for her young mistress.

"She's not feeling very well, but maybe something you can get up will tempt her appetite. I'll take the tray up to her, myself."

This he did, though he had to pause outside her chamber door to gather nerve before turning the key in the lock, feeling sure that Alcina would "make a scene" before he could escape. It proved a needless precaution, for the maiden was lying on her bed, sleeping soundly.

There were traces of tears on her beautiful face, and it was plain enough to be seen that she had undergone much before slumber followed exhaustion.

Keefe Valder gently placed the tray on a little table, standing by the bedside for a few moments, gazing wistfully, regretfully upon his unconscious child. He felt that he would cheerfully resign all hopes of winning the Scottish Chief could he only wipe out the past few weeks beyond recall, standing in the sight of his daughter as she knew him then, honest and manly and pure of heart!

Silently he stole away, closing and locking the door, then going down to eat breakfast. Not only that he was hungry, but he had a morbid fear lest this old woman who questioned him so closely about Alcina should suspect something of the trouble in the house. And before taking his departure, he cautioned the woman against going near the chamber of her young mistress before his return; Miss Valder was feeling poorly, and her shattered nerve demanded perfect rest and seclusion.

It was a far from agreeable task which Keefe Valder now set about, but after his hours of moody reflection he dared not neglect it. Lee Kavanagh had insisted too strongly on the necessity of getting Gretchen Stauffer where they could place a hand on her whenever wanted, for him to disobey, even while thinking it worse than a waste of time.

A fair meal, and a couple of glasses of strong whisky served to steady his nerves and make him look more his wonted self; and as he met one or two friends, passing the time of day with them, without their making any remarks on his personal appearance, Keefe Valder concluded that his recent ordeal could not have left any permanent traces.

He reached the hotel, and asking for Miss Gretchen Stauffer, was speedily introduced to her by the landlord who brought the charming

young lady from the breakfast table to the parlor where Valder waited.

The worthy host, whose curiosity was fully aroused by what he had heard of his fair guest's conduct the day before, showed no great haste in beating a retreat, and really thankful for this, Keefe Valder as briefly as possible made known his object in calling on the young lady.

"A friend of mine, Mr. Kavanagh, happened to mention your being in town, and added that he thought it possible I might prevail upon you to enter my daughter's service for a few weeks, at least. Only for his saying this, I would hardly have dared approach you so unceremoniously."

Gretchen was glancing shyly into his face as he spoke, evidently trying to shape an opinion. Very modest and bashful she appeared, just then, and Keefe Valder was beginning to wonder how much Kavanagh had stretched the truth in his account of the comedy he had witnessed in the street, when the maiden softly murmured:

"How oldt vhas dot laty, mein herr?"

"Well—about twenty years, I believe," was his startled reply.

"I dinks me you saidt your taughter!" with wide-open eyes.

"So I did. It is to be a—a sort of, aw, sort of companion to my daughter, Miss Valder, you know, that I wish to engage you," stammered the speculator, strangely confused by that wondering gaze.

"My cracious mercy me! How ferry young you moost haf pin when you marriet vhas!" murmured Gretchen, her blue eyes rolling up in wonder. "A young laty shild crown ub—and he vhasn't looken so oldt as dot by his own selluf!"

The landlord slipped out of the parlor, with a fist thrust into his mouth to keep from bursting into a hearty laugh. Keefe Valder flushed hot and mentally cursed the folly of Lee Kavanagh in driving him to this interview. But Gretchen seemed wholly innocent of malice or exaggeration, and looked as sweet and coy as a bashful babe.

"Und—und your rife, mein herr? She vhasn't got dime vore here comen—nein?"

"I have no wife," stiffly muttered Valder, rising from his seat as if in haste to put an end to the interview. "I am a widower."

"A widower! Und—you vhasn't a Mormon?"

"Of course not, ma'am!" with increasing heat, putting on his hat. "Since you are not willing to accept my proposal—"

"Vait a leedle, mein herr!" Gretchen cried, grasping him by the arm and checking his flight. "I vhas oxeibt dot brobosal. I hires me outt undo you rightt away kvick. For sure you vhas a widower?"

CHAPTER XXX.

JEALOUSY AND RED LIQUOR.

SURE enough the eyesight of Dutch Dan had not deceived him! It was indeed Gretchen Stauffer whom he saw leaning so affectionately on the arm of a portly, well-dressed gentleman, just leaving the hotel.

Needless to add that her escort was Keefe Valder, after what has just been recorded. Gretchen was not one to lose such a chance to better herself, when once satisfied that the gentleman who offered employment was a widower, and they were not long in coming to an understanding as to terms.

"You vhas name dose brices your own selluf, my gootsir," purred the maiden with a languishing glance into the flushed, uneasy countenance. "I vhas gnow me noddings 'bout dot, by dis blace, and a shendlemans like you vhas nod sheadt a boor lone girl uff she drust butts in your honor—no!"

And haggling was the last thing Keefe Valder thought of just then, close bargainer though he was reputed to be. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that the landlord and clerk and boarders one and all were laughing over his predicament. And, still worse, he began to fear that this curious girl would end by flinging her arms about his neck and loudly claiming him as her captive!

It was not quite so bad as he feared, though more than one broad smile greeted him as he left the hotel, with Gretchen clinging to his arm; for she insisted that the bargain might as well be closed at once, as to incur greater expense by remaining at the hotel.

Dutch Dan dropped the end of the rope to which he had clung all the way to Rough Robin, seemingly forgetting all save his loved one in possession of another man; and as he strode forward with an angry cry, English Sparrow stole away in the opposite direction, eager to rid himself of those humiliating ornaments!

"Gretchen! vhat does all dis mean, anyhow?" spluttered Dutch Dan as he caught at her free hand, scowling frequently into the startled face of Keefe Valder. "Who vhas does pussy vbellers? Vhat makes all dis, und how vhas dot—"

"Vhas you a bart uff a loonadiok azzylum proke loose, I vonders me?" sharply interjected Gretchen, jerking her little paw free, clinging

all the tighter to her employer. "Geel away—you. I makes no holler dot bolice outt! I knows me noddings 'bout you! Ke-rit, now!"

"Mein Gott in Himmel!" gasped Dutch Dan, with uplifted hands and wildly staring eyes. "She knows me nod! My own Gretchen say vor me go schat myselluf! She say she galls dem bolices! Mein Gott! who vhas I shanged undo, anyhow?"

"If you have anything to say to this lady, sir, act a little more sensibly, or I'll have to treat you as what she seems to believe: a lunatic, or, at least, a person unfit for present communication with," stiffly interposed Keefe Valder. "Shall we proceed, Miss Stauffer?"

"Gretchen—von vordt, my tear Gretchen!" pleaded Dutch Dan, his voice trembling, his lips quivering as though on the point of tears.

"I gifts a peggar dot mooch," purred the maiden, with a saucy nod of her red-capped head that sent her blonde braids dancing merrily. "Say you dot von vordt, Daniel Goodykoontz! Und say it in a hoery kvick!"

"You neffer vhas—dot vat guss vhasn't do marry mit you?"

Gretchen cast a shy glance into the hotly flushing face of her employer, pausing long enough for him to put in a word if he saw fit. But as he said nothing, she murmured:

"No—nod rightt away, anyhow! He hires me his leedle shild to look avder, und I vhas got me apove knowing dem low vbellers dot gomes dem oafar, in der sdeerage vrom der Oldt Gountry! Go you py your own vays now, Daniel Goodykoontz, und makes me not droobles, or—see!" and she drew her rawhide from beneath her bodice, making it whistle viciously through the air so close to the face of her jilted lover that he started back, involuntarily clapping one hand to his nose as though fearing to find it missing.

Gretchen, laughing with merry glee and malice combined, moved away from the spot, still clinging to Keefe Valder's arm, leaving Dutch Dan the picture of stupefied dismay.

There were only a few witnesses to this scene, but they seemed to hugely enjoy the little comedy, judging from their laughter.

For a few moments Dutch Dan glared savagely at them his huge hands closing into knotty fists as though he longed to avenge his injured feelings upon these scoffers. Fortunately for himself, it may be, his prudence got the better of his rage, and turning on his heel he strode away to another part of the town.

Bitterly as he no doubt felt his repulse by Gretchen, Dutch Dan still retained some clearness of wit, and bethinking himself of the letter banded him by Tom Penny, he entered a saloon to ask where he might expect to find the man whose name was written on the envelope.

Again good fortune stood by him, for the man addressed happened to be in the saloon when the barkeeper read his name aloud, and in a few moments he had informed himself as to what his friend desired.

"You understand, mates," he added, as he placed the note in his breast, one hand resting lightly on the shoulder of the pilgrim. "This gentleman is on our side. Tom Penny vouches for him, and asks you all through me, to see that the gang Bully Baldwin and Lee Kavanagh trains with don't give him too rough a racket. As long as it's man to man, the pilgrim is capable of rustling for himself, but if it comes to double-banking, wade in for all you're worth!"

"What Tom Penny says goes as it lays, of course!"

"Have another nail, and then pull out to spread the word among the lads. Come, Dutchy; poison yourself just once, for luck!"

Dutch Dan was nothing loth, leaning against the bar as he said:

"Dot vhas der vay to pegin, aind't it? I makes me so droonk like a gouble uff vried owls! I vhas grow recklessness all oafar! I vhas mat py myselluf und eaferypoty pesites! I vills myselluf shuck up mit dose boisons, und go vight dose whole down! I vhas a p-a-t-m-a-n mit two glubs in each handt! I vhas a vhalrus mid sixteen dushes, und I veigh me dose sgaes down fife don!"

Dutch Dan made a bold beginning, and those who saw him gulp down the fiery poison like so much water, felt that the pilgrim meant all he said, wildly bombastic though it may read.

Tom Penny's friend quietly sent out word to the party who favored their side of the dispute, and within an hour fully one half of the best men in town knew that they were to keep an eye open for the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg, ready to interfere in his behalf in case the Kavanagh clique attempted to even up the account.

For by this time the story of English Sparrow was all over town, he having unfortunately for his hopes, stumbled over a couple of the opposing party, who found the jest far too rich to keep to themselves. And not only did the humiliated shadow swear to get even with Dutch Dan for forcing him into town thus, but it was rumored about that Bully Baldwin had recovered sufficiently to want revenge for his defeat.

To all of this Dutch Dan paid no attention. He was sullen, scowling, unsocial even among his new-found friends. All he seemed to want just then was to drown his grief in bad liquor,

and to accomplish this he passed from one saloon to another, drinking like a fish.

Thus the day wore on, and the afternoon was declining, when English Sparrow in company with a select few of his allies, met with Dutch Dan at one of the saloons.

"Hellow!" cried out the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg, wheeling quickly as the party entered the building, steadying himself against the bar, seemingly too drunk to stand erect. "Dot vhas you, eh? Where you but dot rope und dose shingles mit ledders on? Vhas you makes dem in der handt uff dot Lee Gavanagh, like you vhas doid, my leedle ainshell?"

English Sparrow had nerved himself with more than one heavy dose of liquor, and now that he saw Dutch Dan seemingly so drunk that he could hardly stand alone, his evil passions gained the better of his natural cowardice, and he fancied he saw a method of at least partially wiping out the stain which had been cast upon his dignity.

A quick glance showed him that his allies outnumbered those present who favored the opposite side, and really believing he ran but little personal risk, he resolved to "get even" then and there.

"Ello yourself, you Dutch swill-tub!" he snarled, angrily, pushing his hat far back on his head and glaring into the face of his stupidly smiling enemy. "Touch your 'at when you speak to me, will ye? Fer ha 'alf bob I'll thump the blooming 'ead o' ye! I'll howe ye one, hany'ow, had hif I thought ye wasn't too drunk to put hup yer dukes, I'll d maul the bloody daylight hout o' ye—so I would, now!"

Dutch Dan stared stupidly at the blustering manikin, seeming unable to realize just what he was trying to get at. And as English Sparrow, gathering courage as he saw how bewildered the pilgrim looked, bristled up before him still more offensively, he turned to one of his new friends and muttered unsteadily:

"Vhat dot leedle gock-sbarrow means py all dose gutting-ubs? Vhas he dose sdomach-aches got, you dinks? Uff so—"

"He wants to whip you, Dutchy; that's all," laughed the other, lightly.

"He vhands to whip—go you avay kvick, now, leedle gock-sbarrow," Dutch Dan frowned, straightening up from against the bar, his feet widening to steady his swaying figure. "Go hide yourself in a biut pottle, und gork dot oop dight, you pedder, my goot friendt. Uff you make me soom more voolishness like dot, I sphanks you my knee oafar!"

Egged on by his mischief-loving pards, and thinking Dutch Dan too drunk to handle himself at all, English Sparrow leaped forward and hit out with his clinched fists, hoping to blind the big fellow with his unexpected attack. But Dutch Dan was not too far gone for defending himself, it seemed.

Swift and vicious though that assault was, though amply justified by the words which had passed between the twain, the pilgrim arrested the fists, twisting their owner from his feet with the same movement, then squatting on the floor, whipping the bewildered spy over his lap and holding him powerless with one muscular hand.

"Fair play, gents!" sharply cried one of the sports whom Tom Penny's note had placed on guard. "The Sparrow began the row, and until one or the other squeals, no interfering."

Pistols were drawn on both sides, but neither seemed inclined to fire the first shot, though the enemy outnumbered the allies of Dutch Dan. Still, all knew that the first shot would bring the whole town to the scene, when little short of a pitched battle must result.

Dutch Dan paid no attention to the warlike display on each side, seeming to have eyes and thoughts only for the vicious little rascal who now lay so powerless in his strong grasp.

"Peesness is peesness, und voolishness is vorser as volley, leedle shack-shumber!" grunted the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg as he leaned over to untie one of his big brogans. "You make too mooch droobles py your own goot, I dinks me, gock-sbarrow. Von uff dose tays you roon yourself ub againtst a v heller dot vixes you vor blanding down in dose grafeyardts you doid me about, uff I don't deaches you soom pedder manners as dose—dot's so, vor ure, now! Und so—dakes you dot, und dose, und dem, und der whole kerpoodle like dot, eh?"

Up rose the hand, grasping the brogan by its heel. Down it fell, with a force that started a miniature cloud of dust out of the poor little rascal's trowsers, just where his uncomfortable position drew the fabric the tightest. Once, twice—half a dozen times in swift succession before Dutch Dan paused to renew his grip on the instrument of torture. And, rising even above the wild howls and groans of the luckless wretch, were heard the drunken tones of Dutch Dan:

"Sbare dot shoon und sboil dose rascals! I makes me neffer so sdngy like dot. I veare me dwo gouple uff bair outt rightt avay kvick rudder as I led you go sboil, my leedle v heller? Und so—"

Not until English Sparrow begged piteously for mercy did Dutch Dan cease his spanking. Then, utterly cowed, intensely miserable, the spy limped out of the saloon as rapidly as he

could, leaving the man he thought to whip standing at the bar, gravely inviting all hands to have a drink with him. And as they fell into rank, he said, with drunken gravity:

"I drinks me goot luck und pedder manners by dot gock-sbarrow."

CHAPTER XXXI.

SCHEMERS IN COUNCIL.

LEE KAVANAGH rode homeward far more leisurely than he had journeyed in the opposite direction that morning, and if he wasn't in a thoroughly comfortable mood, naught in his face declared the contrary.

He stabled his good horse and had his landlord prepare him a hot meal, though it was considerably past the noon hour. He ate heartily, had a smoke, then sent a messenger out that speedily brought several of his most trusty adherents to his room.

Keefe Valder was uneasily waiting for something to turn up, comforting himself out of the replenished decanter, when Lee Kavanagh made him a call. And seated together, much as we saw them the night before, the partners touched glasses, then proceeded to business.

"I found the old rascal in limbo, safe enough, but stiff-necked and saucy as ever; more so, if anything."

"And how did he explain the failure of the order he sent Penny?"

"Didn't think it worth while explaining it at all," laughed Lee Kavanagh, seeming to regard the whole matter as a good jest. "Seemed to take it as a matter of course, and pretended to believe that Tom Penny wouldn't have delivered up the property he holds in trust. Matter what sort of orders he sent him."

"And you left him—well?"

Keefe Valder strove hard to put this question in easy, smooth tones, but failed completely. Not only his unsteady voice betrayed his secret anxiety, but there was a haunting fear and doubt in his blood-veined eyes as they stole a covert glance into the dark face of his partner.

Lee Kavanagh laughed softly, his eyes half-closed as he held a replenished glass between his face and the open window.

"Did I slit his throat, or drill a hole through his thick skull, you mean?"

Keefe Valder mumbled something about hot temper, and the bitter annoyance of feeling oneself being made an idiot of.

"All of which I agree to, dear fellow" purred Kavanagh, with a mocking smile playing about his red lips as his gaze turned from the whisky to the florid face of his partner in crime. "And though I felt for you—for you were the one old McGregor struck hardest, remember, since it was your scheme almost wholly—I couldn't bring myself to play butcher just for that. And, to tell the truth, I fancied I could put the old gentleman to a much better use than killing."

"I wish I could believe you," scowled Valder, evidently strengthened by the liquor he imbibed so freely. "But it's either a curse or a sneer with you, and there's no telling which one to believe most."

"Take it all as Gospel truth, pard, and let the settling do itself then," lazily retorted the dark-faced schemer.

"And this Dutch Dan, as he calls himself? What of him? You've heard how he brought the Sparrow back to town?"

"I've heard enough to form an idea, though Sparrow has taken good care not to flutter across my path since I came back to town. Not a bad joke, considering who set it going; you know Tom Penny is of Scotch descent."

Keefe Valder scowled afresh. Not at anything his partner said, but rather because he did not say enough. Surely, with the game at that critical stage, they could not afford to waste time in idle talk. They must be up and doing, unless they were ready to admit defeat.

Until now he had been the one to make suggestions and take the initiative, but he hardly dared do this after the display Lee Kavanagh made on the night last past. One such severe lesson was quite sufficient for a time; he dared not invite another of the same sort.

And yet—surely he had a right to know just what this cool, smiling, masterful villain was doing.

Lee Kavanagh laughed softly, a malicious glitter in his dark eyes as they accurately read the doubts and fears of his partner by the rapid changes in his face.

"The collar pinches, doesn't it, dear fellow?" he purred, mockingly. "Comes hard to pull where you've so long been used to driving? Well—the lesson will not be wholly wasted, if it shows you the little discomforts which I have had to grin and bear up under for the past few weeks!"

"Take your own way, curse you!" growled the elder rascal, pouring himself out another glass of whisky and tossing it off at a gulp.

"Of course I will, leaving out the curses, you know," was the easy retort; then changing in tone and manner as by magic: "And now that I've given you a dose of your own medicine, we'll get down to business."

"Old Sawney is safe and sound, where we can put the screws on whenever needed; but after the display he has already made, I'm not eager

to trust my eggs all in that basket. The rascal is a heap sight tougher than I gave him credit for, and might contrive to ring in another cold hand on us, just when we looked for a pretty set of high trumps."

"This Dutch Dan, who looks so much like old McGregor in face and figure, I've pretty well decided is nothing more than he claims to be: a vagabond Dutchman on the loose. I can't well see what else he is, though there is something decidedly fishy about the racket he and that Gretchen Stauffer have been giving the town, too! But let him pass for the present."

"You know how the town has divided up. You know that Tom Penny can count on fully as many hands as we can muster; and too, he has more of the decent element with him—worse luck!"

"It's a cursedly black outlook, sure enough!" scowled Valder.

"Do you really think so?" purred Kavanagh, his brows arching in surprise, real or mocking.

"Isn't it, then? That infernal Penny will never give up! After refusing what was offered yesterday, he'll hold out against all else!"

"Wait and see; give the poor devil a living show, anyway, pard."

"What do you mean?"

"That we have no right to prejudge the fellow. We gave him four-and-twenty hours to reach a decision, and that time of grace is not yet exhausted, though it soon will be. Until then, let the gentleman rest."

"We want to win, of course, since we've taken so much trouble with that end in view. Matters were beginning to look mighty dubious when I kicked over the traces and concluded to change places with you, old fellow!"

"How much better are they now?" snarled Valder, with a vicious glance into that dark handsome face.

"If no worse, you should be satisfied, since blunders such as you have been guilty of are not so readily checked. But I claim that they are mending, though it will call for mighty delicate manipulation before we can fill up our hats—and fill our pockets!"

"You realize, of course, that we can't afford to throw the matter into the courts, even with those documents in our possession and Gregor McGregor where he can't bear witness. With Tom Penny in possession, the weight would rest on our shoulders. Our papers would be too closely scrutinized for our health. Justice is blind, they tell us, but I know she is mighty apt to keep her best eye riveted on the party with the slimmest pocketbook!"

"You know the old saw about the stubborn song-bird? Call Tom Penny that bird. For singing, read yielding, and—"

"He'll never give up," scowled Valder, who seemed to take a grim pleasure in looking at the darker side of the picture ever since his partner deposed him from the lead. "Ally couldn't shake him. And when that failed, my last hope went with it!"

"Give the young fellow time, pard! The period of grace has expired already, but it's a nice little tramp out to the mine, and I hardly look forward from there for half an hour, yet."

"You'll think he'll come to bring his decision?" asked Valder.

"Hardly that, unless he is prepared to eat dirt," laughed Kavanagh, as he rose from his seat and glanced out at the window, peering forth curiously like one expecting a message or a messenger. "But I sent off a trusty hand to spare him that trouble, and yonder he comes, right now!"

All affectation vanished as these words passed his lips swiftly, and Keefe Valder also hastened to the window, peering forth curiously. He caught sight of a man hastening toward the building, taking the short cut by which Tom Penny reached the house on a former occasion.

Lee Kavanagh waved a handkerchief out through the broken pane, and the signal was promptly answered by the man's waving his hat.

"Back and smooth your face, pard," said Kavanagh, pushing his companion away from the window and resuming his own seat. "Dave Flint is trusty enough, but he carries mighty sharp eyes in his head, and there's no need of letting him see just how important we may think his report. I'll let him in, and you'll let me do what little talking there may be required. You sabe, Valder?"

The elder man nodded assent, and when the brisk rap came at the front door, Lee Kavanagh hastened to admit the messenger, bringing him into the room and pouring out a glass of whisky for his drinking.

"Wash the dust out of your throat, man, and you'll talk all the plainer," he said, with a careless laugh.

Dave Flint obeyed without making any wry face over the dose.

"You saw the gentleman, of course, Flint?"

"See him, an' told him I was come fer to fetch back his answer to you, boss," was the prompt response, as the giant sunk into a chair.

"And that answer was?"

"That he was holdin' the Scottish Chief. That

he 'lowed to keep on holdin' of it, until the owner come to relieve him, boss!"

"Much as I expected, knowing his mulishness. And you told him?"

"Jest what you said I was to tell ef he hedn't made up his mind to act decent an' knuckle down at the word," grinned the messenger.

"Which was that we consented to give him one more chance, rather than make his fool heels break his own neck—or words to that effect!" laughed Kavanagh, sipping his whisky with an air of enjoyment.

"Wal, I didn't putt it jest that way, boss, seein' as they was a dozen or couple Winchesters grinnin' at the mug o' me over the stockade; but it putt it plenty plain enough fer no mistake to slip in. I said you was willin' to wait until this time to-morrow, when you'd call in heap style fer to get his last say-so. Was that right?"

"Straight as a string, David," nodded Kavanagh, pushing the decanter across the table as he added: "Help yourself some more, and then you can consider yourself off duty until I call on you again. Drink hearty!"

The giant promptly availed himself of this invitation, filling his glass to the rim, using his big fingers as a shield to cover his greed. The oily liquor vanished in a twinkling, and he rose from his seat.

"You can find the way out, I reckon, David. Shut the door behind you, and never mind telling all the town where you've been or just what you've heard. You *sabe*, David?"

"I'll keep a close lip, boss, ef only to hold in the taste o' that red licker longer," grinned the giant, bowing himself out of the room.

Not a word was interchanged by the partners until after the outer door closed and they knew Dave Flint was on his way into town. Then Keefe Valder broke the silence with a sulky growl:

"Well, what else did you expect? And surely you are not idiot enough to look for a different answer by this time to-morrow?"

"You see no ray of hope, then?" drawled Kavanagh, provokingly.

"Nor you either!" snapped Valder.

"And yet if I was to tell you that before the sun sets to-morrow we would have full possession of the Scottish Chief, what would you think of that?"

Keefe Valder stared at his partner with wide-open eyes. There was a strange, evil smile on that darkly handsome face, but hardly that of one who was cracking a joke at another's expense. Rather it was the smile of one who feels he has won a heavy stake against odds!

"What do you mean? Or—do you mean anything?"

"Fill your glass, and draw up a little closer, pard. Of course no one can eavesdrop us here, but all the same, I'd rather your ears alone caught my words. For if anything should happen to cause a slip-up now, salt couldn't save us!" impressively muttered Kavanagh.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TREACHERY MOST ATROCIOUS.

"THEY'RE crowdin' along purty lively, boss!" muttered Ridge Tanner as he took a glance beyond the stockades. "Reckon they's goin' fer to be a rocky racket out yender ef somebody ain't mighty reckless 'bout how he shoots off his mouth!"

"I trust it won't come to that," said Tom Penny, with a troubled expression in his face as he also looked over the gathering beyond the stout pickets which served to keep intruders from overrunning the workings. "But if it should—well, I can see more than one good friend out yonder!"

"An' they's plenty o' us in yere to whip off the hull town, even ef we didn't number a fri'nd in the hull 'billin'!" grimly laughed the veteran as he looked to his repeater.

The second period of grace allowed by the enemy had expired. It was now quite late in the afternoon of the second day, counting from the time of Tom Penny's visit to the house of Keefe Valder.

For full half an hour past, men had been seen by the mine-defenders moving toward the works, yet keeping tolerably well out of easy range, lying around in careless attitudes as though anticipating a "circus" of some sort. One or two among them, well known as being friendly to the mine-manager, ventured closer to the stockade, exchanging a few words with Tom Penny, but retiring again at his request.

"I can't believe there'll be any row," he told them, gravely; "but if there should, keep your fingers out of it, please! I'll not strike the first blow, but if it is struck, be sure I'll defend my trust as long as I can sight a rifle or deal a blow! And if it should grow hot in front, we wouldn't have time to pick out our enemies from our friends."

The friendly parties fell back, after assuring Penny that the gang headed by Lee Kavanagh shouldn't have all the amusement to themselves.

Little by little the number of men without grew larger, until it really seemed as though all Rough Robin was coming to partake or witness; but as yet the keenest scrutiny on the part of

the mine-defenders failed to discover aught of either Lee Kavanagh or Keefe Valder.

"They ain't but the one way fer to git at us," grimly uttered Tanner, after a period of silence.

"Ef they was, I'd be thinkin' the imps o' darkness was tryin' to run a traverse onto us! Es it is—I don't reckon the band'll begin playin' afore one o' the high-muck-a-mucks show up tha'r sweet mugs!"

There was little stir and less noise within the stockade. Every man—a round dozen besides Tom Penny and Ridge Tanner—was ready for work in case the worst should come. Grim and silent they waited, Winchester repeaters in hand, each belt fully stocked with cartridges, and each hip showing a heavy revolver for use at close quarters should the enemy persist in crowding them.

"It won't come to that, though!" laughed Tanner, who actually appeared eager for the conflict—the sanguinary old sinner! "Time them critters hev swallered all the pills we've got bottled up in these yer patent stomach-pumps, they'll be wantin' to hunt a hole to be sick into, I reckon! Waal, they jest *will*, now!"

Tom Penny made no response, though his worthy lieutenant glanced in that direction as though he at least counted on a smile for reward. His gaze was fixed on some moving objects far down the trail leading to Rough Robin, and he seemed lost to all else just then.

Tanner stared in the same direction for a moment, then cried:

"Be durned ef it hain't, now! Thar comes the two durned ole an' young p'izen! Look at the strut of 'em, will ye? Ef they don't own the hull airth, they try to make out as ef they'd orter, anyhow!"

"It is Keefe Valder and Lee Kavanagh, sure enough!" muttered Tom Penny, lowering his gaze for a moment, his face growing a shade paler.

Then, with forced calmness he added:

"You will keep silence, my fine fellows, and let me do what talking is necessary. And—if worst comes to the worst—I wish—"

He paused, a curious lump rising in his throat that unsteady his voice. And before he could conquer it, Ridge Tanner said:

"We all know how it is, boss, an' feels fer ye clean down to the boots o' us! An' ef it *does* come to shootin', they ain't one o' us'll pull onto old Valder ef we kin git out of it—eh, lads?"

The response was prompt and unanimous. Though Tom Penny never wore his heart in his sleeve, pretty much all Rough Robin understood how matters were between him and Keefe Valder's daughter. And not a bullet would be sent against the old man, if it could possibly be avoided.

Curious enough the defenders watched the approach of their head enemies, giving a low buzz as Keefe Valder paused while still a considerable distance away, leaving Lee Kavanagh to advance alone. This he did after a leisurely fashion, drawing a white kerchief from his bosom and knotting it to the end of the slender cane he carried.

"It's a powwow he wants, I take it from that," muttered Ridge Tanner, curiously. "But don't you think o' goin' outside, boss! I can't see as the critter kerries any tools, but be sure he's fixed fer pizen bitin' ef a good chance offers! Make him keep his distance. The air is clear aplenty fer long-range talkin'."

Lee Kavanagh seemed to have much the same opinion, for he paused while still a goodly distance from the front of the stockade, throwing one leg over an end of a good-sized boulder beside the trail, lightly waving his improvised flag of truce above his head as he half sat, half stood in careless ease.

"What is wanted, Mr. Kavanagh?" called out Tom Penny, lightly leaping upon the top stringer which helped hold the pickets together.

"You received my message, yesterday, I believe, Mr. Penny?" was the prompt response. "I have come to receive your answer."

"You might as well spared your shoe-leather, sir," was the cold retort. "I bade your messenger to tell you that my answer of yesterday would be my answer of to-day, of to-morrow, of all time between this and the coming of Gregor McGregor, the rightful owner of this mine, the Scottish Chief!"

"So Dave Flint informed me; but I hoped you would think better of it with a little more time in which to weigh the points."

"I have given you no grounds for such a hope, sir. There is but one course an honest man can pursue, and that is to perform his sworn duty. I have told you what I consider that duty, and I will stand by that belief as long as a breath of life remains in my body."

"At least, you will permit me to show where and why I am confident you are making a serious mistake, Mr. Penny!"

"I will listen, if you think it is worth while," was the cold response. "But I frankly warn you that it will be breath spent in vain. Nothing you can say or do will alter my resolve."

"Is that exactly just to us, Mr. Penny? We have showed you the original patent to the claim known as the Scottish Chief, fully and legally transferred to us, as a firm, for full consideration

received. More than that, we have presented to you an order signed by Gregor McGregor, directing you to turn all this property over to us, its now sole and lawful owners, retaining that written order as your discharge from duty and a receipt for all accounts. Do you deny this?"

"Not the writing, nor the note, Mr. Kavanagh," raising his voice so that all the crowd could catch and comprehend his meaning. "But I do deny all the rest. I deny that Gregor McGregor wishes me to turn over this property to you. To the contrary, I swear that he has ordered me on my sacred oath to hold out against all claims until he can come to take charge of the Scottish Chief in person!"

"You can prove your statement, of course, Mr. Penny?" coolly responded Kavanagh, showing his teeth in a peculiar smile, visible even at that distance. "You will not mind showing that order, over the signature of Gregor McGregor? Of course it will bear a date, and a later date than the document which we hold, since you accept it as a guide to your actions."

"I can show the order, but I do not admit your right to demand its production."

"Really, you are hardly reasonable, my dear fellow!" cried Kavanagh with indignation, real or admirably counterfeited. "We have purchased the property in good faith. We have paid for it, in spot cash. We hold the papers to back up our claims, and you deny our rights. Then, when we simply ask to see your authority for disobeying the plain orders of the man whom you admit is your employer, you affect to carry it off with a high hand, denying us that simple right—not *favor*, please bear in mind! Is this white, I ask you?"

"You have your alternative, Mr. Kavanagh," coldly. "Place your claims in the hands of the law, and call on it to decide between us. Until you do that, or until Gregor McGregor comes to assume charge, I not only deny your claims, but I stand prepared to defend my trust even with rifle, revolver and knife! If you—"

He said no more.

A sharp explosion came from the rocks to the left of the trail, and with a choking, gasping cry, Tom Penny flung up his arms and swayed like a drunken man for a moment, then toppled over into the arms of Ridge Tanner, like a dead man!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FLIGHT OF THE ASSASSIN.

UP among the rocks an assassin had been lying under cover for hours past, patiently waiting for the moment when he might earn his blood-money.

Before the citizens of Rough Robin began to gather in front of the stockade, he stole from crag to crag, cautiously working his way nearer the defenses, displaying all the silent skill of an Indian brave on the scent of a coveted scalp, pausing for good only when he had secured a position from whence he could command not only the line of pickets but the space inclosed by them as well.

He cast a long, keen, calculating glance back the way he had come, like a man who is marking out a line of speedy flight in advance. If so, he appeared to be satisfied with what he saw, for he once more turned his eyes toward the stockade, altering his position to an easier one.

"It's good enough here, I reckon," he muttered to himself. "Let Tom Penny show his head out yonder, and he's my mutton! I couldn't ask for a better rest, or a neater range than this!"

He drew a Winchester rifle closer to his side, opening the lever block to make sure a cartridge was in readiness for use, closing it again with a soft click. The extreme muzzle he rested on the rock before him, but not protruding it enough to attract attention from the mine-defenders. A slight motion brought the butt to his shoulder, and an almost imperceptible movement caused the double sights to sweep along the stockade top.

"All set, gentlemen: make your game!" the assassin softly laughed, as he lowered the weapon once more.

It would have been no easy task for his most intimate friend to have recognized this person, just then. If his disguise was not handsome, it was perfect in its way.

A mass of dingy, dirty rags clothed his limbs and body. His feet were covered with a pair of worn-out hoots, hard and spotted with mold, as though just taken from the gutter after having been long abandoned by the one who last owned them. A mass of shaggy wood-like hair covered his head and face, only partly held in subjection by a dirty yellow kerchief knotted behind his ears. Little but his nose showed through this grizzled mass, and that was of a dull, brick-red color.

As he lay in ambush, the ragged wretch produced a small quantity of dry grass from among his rags, and deftly wove it into a rude sort of crown or fringe to the rock before him, through which he could peer with less likelihood of his actions being noticed by any of the mine-defenders.

"Not that they'll think of looking up this

way when once the boss has put in an appearance below," he laughed, softly, as he lazily completed this bit of work and tested its efficacy. "But it's just as well to keep on the safe side of the fence: Satan knows I'm running long enough chances at the best!"

Masked behind this bit of grass, the ragged wretch watched the gathering of the citizens below, coldly waiting for the signal which was to stain his hands red with the life-blood of a man worth myriads of his kind. He plainly did not lack for nerve, whatever his failings.

The greater the number of witnesses there was to his foul crime, the greater the chances against his escape with life after the attempt exposed him.

"Didn't I know that, first off?" he muttered to himself, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Didn't I know it was the maddest bluff of all my life? But—what could a fellow do, with him driving him? Just what I've done; made the best terms I could, and leave the rest to pure luck and nerve!"

For all his bravado and affected recklessness, there was a vicious anger in his glowing eyes as he said this. Plainly he was not there of his own free will. Clearly a stronger will drove him to playing this devilishly foul part!

Through his mask of grass, the assassin noted the coming of Keefe Valier and Lee Kavanagh, far down the trail leading from Rough Robin, and his hand gripped his Winchester as though he knew the end could not be far away.

Grimly, closely he watched all that followed, giving a low growl as he saw Lee Kavanagh pause at the bowlder beside the trail.

"Dodge quick, you demon!" he muttered, his eyes flashing wickedly. "You need a bigger rock than that to cover you if it was at your carcass. I'm to aim, instead of a better man!"

He saw Tom Penny spring upon the stringer near the top of the stockade, and gave a peculiar shrug as he saw how clearly that athletic figure was outlined against the white rock-wall beyond.

"Luck's dead against you, poor devil!" he muttered between his teeth as he reached forward and broke away a portion of the dry grass blades, then pushing his rifle-muzzle over the top of the rock thus laid bare. "I couldn't miss your bigness if I was to try!"

It was curious, the tinge of pity that ran through his mutterings, even while he was coldly, precisely preparing to make sure work of it.

He lay at full length on his stomach, his elbows on the ground, his hands holding the rifle-butt firmly against his shoulder, its muzzle resting on the flat-topped rock, the whole still and steady as fate, with the double sights covering the unsuspecting mine-manager.

The assassin cast one keen, searching glance around and to his rear as he heard Lee Kavanagh speaking more sharply. Then, with nerves as steady as they would have been were his mark an insensate target, the hired assassin covered the mine-manager once more, dwelling for a single breath on his aim, then pressing the trigger.

So certain was he of his aim that he never seemed to think it possible he had failed to do his foul work, or that another shot might be necessary. He dropped the rifle and swiftly backed away from his covert, hoping to escape unseen while the crowd was cast into wild confusion over the atrocious deed.

One moment of stunned silence after that ringing report, after the choking cry from Tom Penny's lips before he toppled over to be caught in the arms of honest Ridge Tanner, then a fierce, vengeful chorus rose from the citizens below, and the assassin believed that he had been discovered by some keen eyes!

He leaped to his feet and dashed away at breakneck speed along the line of retreat which he had previously marked out, thinking no longer of skulking, knowing that speed and good-luck alone could save him from paying the full penalty due his bloody deed.

Even as he leaped up to flee, he realized his error and ground a vicious curse between his teeth; that wild yell had not meant discovery, but was drawn forth by the dastardly shot itself.

It was too late to regret his precipitancy now, however. A score of eyes caught sight of him the instant he rose to his feet, and blending with that fierce, vengeful yell, came the wicked rattle of pistols, the hot lead hurtling past and over him, or flattening venomously on the rocks hard by.

"It's catching first!" he grated, as the yell of blood came to his ears across the intervening space. "Catching before hanging! And ten minutes more will insure my neck against all the hemp in the Territory!"

It was a rough and rugged pathway over which to pass at speed, but the assassin was a man of clear brain and steady nerves, never more noticeable than now when he was fleeing for dear life from a hundred bloodthirsty enemies. He never allowed himself to deviate from the line of flight which he had laid down at first, though one less cool might easily have been tempted to keep more under cover while those pellets of lead were whistling past so

viciously. Straight along, with swift, agile leaps, his rags fluttering in the breeze awakened by his passage, his shaggy locks floating out from beneath his bandaged head, looking like some wild man of the mountains, the assassin fled for the good horse which he had carefully secreted to meet just such an emergency as this.

And though scores of bullets came whistling in chase, as yet not a single pellet had broken skin, though more than once the fugitive felt a sharp twitch or tug at his fluttering rags. And then, with a mocking flourish of his right hand, the assassin plunged into a cross defile, at the bottom of which his good steed was fastened.

Half a dozen active leaps carried him to the whimpering animal, and jerking the halter free, the assassin leaped into the saddle, dashing away through the cross-cut at full speed, laughing grimly:

"First catch your hare, gentlemen! A thousand to one that the lone hand wins the game!" he cried, as he sped along at reckless speed.

He had good grounds for believing himself safe. So far as he knew, not one of the citizens of Rough Robin had brought a horse with them to the Scottish Chief. And they would have a difficult climb before they could strike that defile, during which he would surely gain such an advantage that it would be worse than folly for footmen to even think of persisting in the pursuit.

"And long before they can get horses and pick up my trail, the other end will be lost in empty space!" the exultant assassin laughed, as he drove his heels against the flanks of his good horse, casting a sweeping glance behind him, though this was purely instinctive, for none knew better than he that it was impossible for even the most active of the citizens to have gained the rocky ridge so soon.

A dozen seconds later he came to a point where the defile widened and branched out into two trails, and he turned his horse sharply into the right-hand cut, though this seemed to trend toward Rough Robin more acutely than prudence could approve of.

"So much the better!" he laughed, answering the thought above his breath, as he turned his head, "beard on shoulder," to cast another glance backward. "The rocks leave no sign, and they'll never believe I'm fool enough to double after this fashion! Ten to one they'll bark along the other trail, and never suspect that they've overrun their game! Bah! it's only sport to outwit those blunder-heads!"

He pressed on at full speed until he rounded another curve in the narrow valley-like pass, then drew rein and leaped to the ground, taking some ready prepared mufflers of rawhide from where they were secured to his saddle, deftly fitting him on his animal's hoofs, fastening them well, yet not tightly enough to interfere with the creature's action.

"Bring on your bloodhounds, gentlemen!" he laughed, mockingly, as he once more leaped into the saddle and started on. "For it's dead sure human eyes won't take much out of the trail I'm laying from this on!"

"Vhas dot so?" cried a sharp voice, as its owner leaped out directly in front of the horse, only a few yards in advance. "Vait a leedle, my ferry goot frient, uff you blease? I vhands me—"

The assassin jerked up his horse so fiercely that the animal reared up and pawed the air furiously, barely escaping a backward fall, its mad struggles destroying the last hope of its rider; for before he could use the revolver which flashed forth in his trained grip, a bony hand closed upon his right arm, jerking him from the saddle to strike with stunning force on the flinty ground!

"Don'tt you make me droobles, my vhine vheeler!" cried Dutch Dan, sternly, as he unseated the assassin.

With a frightened snort, the horse sprung to one side, dragging its rider after him, fastened by one foot in a stirrup. And only for marvelous celerity and rare presence of mind on the part of the "Pilgrim from Spitzenberg," the foul murder of Tom Penny would have been most frightfully avenged.

The assassin was too near stunned to help himself, and his foot was so caught that his weight but held it more tightly imprisoned. The terrified animal was gathering itself for flight, and on that rocky trail death would surely have followed a drag of only a few rods.

But Dutch Dan flashed forth a knife and leaping forward, still clutching his captive by an arm, and with a quick slash cutting the stirrup-leather in two. None to soon! With a wild snort, the frightened creature dashed madly away, leaving its rider alive, but comparatively helpless in the grip of the man who had risen in his path just when he felt most certain of escape.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PILGRIM LIFTS HIS MASK.

EVEN as Dutch Dan was working to save him from a frightful death, the fallen assassin managed to draw a second pistol, only saved from

using it by the quick leap back which the pilgrim made as the horse lashed out its heels before darting away. His foot struck the armed hand, knocking the weapon out of the partially benumbed fingers. The pistol exploded as it struck against a rock, but the bullet did no harm.

"Vhell you vhas a hail uff a vheller, I do me dinks!" exploded the pilgrim in indignant tones as he stooped and jerked his captive to his feet, rapidly passing a hand over his person to make sure he had no other weapons. "Vor leedle I go gatch me dot boss und sthick you py dot voot vast ag'in!"

"Let up! what have I done, you bound!" gasped the other, trying to break away from that sturdy grip. "If you want to rob—"

"Uff dose vhiskeys und dot peard?" interposed Dutch Dan, tearing off both as he spoke, revealing a pale, handsome face. "I had an idea I'd find you under that thatch, Bully Baldwin!" he added, with a low, stern laugh, his broken pronunciation dropping away at the same time with the unmasking of the gambler.

"I haven't done anything—"

"But you're going to do something, and that is pick up a mighty lively pair of feet for a bit. Bully," curtly interrupted the pilgrim. "I don't know just what sort of deviltry you've been dabbling in, but I do know that there's a right smart crowd hunting you this very minute. And I reckon I want you just a bit more than they do!"

"You can murder me if—"

"Business, Bully! Which would you rather have me do: turn you over to the gang from the Scottish Chief, or set you leg-free after I've had a bit of talk with you in a snug spot where we needn't fear interruption from outsiders? Take your choice, and be quick about it!"

Faint, yet unmistakable, came the distant yells of the blood-avengers, and Bully Baldwin hesitated no longer. Surely he would be hung if those men caught him! And there was always a chance for getting the better of a single adversary!

"Don't let them sight me, or we're both gone!" he muttered, huskily, with a nervous glance in the direction from whence came those cries. "For I'll swear you had a finger in the pie as well!"

Dutch Dan made no reply, but pushed Bully Baldwin on ahead of him, leaving the trail and scaling the rocks to the left.

"Mind you don't try any tricks, Bully," he warningly uttered. "I don't want to rub you out, just yet, but I'll do it rather than take too much bother. Press on, and I'll give you the office when you've gone far enough for the first spurt."

The gambler glanced back long enough to see that his captor held an ugly-looking knife in his right hand, ready for a stroke or a cast as circumstances made necessary, and sullenly pressed on in the direction given him by Dutch Dan.

Only for a few rods. When they gained a cleft in the rocks where they were securely hidden from any eyes a score yards away, Dutch Dan tripped his captive up, kneeling on his back while he twisted both arms behind him, firmly knotting them there.

"You're too slippery a critter to trust further than a blind man can see, Bully," he coolly observed as he got up and lifted the gambler once more to his feet. "I'll risk your outfooting me, but I don't like to have to watch both hoofs and paws."

"What are you going to do with me? Who are you, anyway?" sullenly growled the captive, his blue eyes filled with vicious hatred and rage.

"Your master, just now. And I'm going to take you where I can reason with your royal bigness like a Dutch uncle. Take that for an answer, and march forward quick-foot, Bully! Time's precious, and those bloodhounds are yelping mighty keen on your trail! Pity if they should pick you up—before I've pumped you dry, anyway!"

Bully Baldwin yielded without another word. It was too late to think of resistance now. If he had only dared try it while his hands were free!

"But you didn't, Bully," laughed Dutch Dan, who seemed to read what passed through his brain simply by noting the expression of his face. "And if you had, the result would have been the same. As a clumsy Dutch lout I bested you in Rough Robin. And now I'm myself again, the job would be even easier. So—march!"

Part of the time forcing his captive in advance, then taking the lead himself, Dutch Dan—for lack of a more suitable name—kept going for fully an hour, before coming to a halt in a snug covert far in the heart of the hills, where discovery by the blood-avengers would be little less than a miracle.

"Take a seat, Bully, and touch your lips to this," holding an uncorked flask to the lips of his captive for a few seconds. "That will wash the cobwebs out of your throat, and limber your tongue. The last is what I want to make the most use of, just now, though the neck may have to play its part in case you turn up rusty."

He dropped down in an easy position in front of his captive, gazing curiously into his face for a few moments before adding:

"You asked me down yonder who I was, and what I wanted of you, my good fellow. I hadn't time to explain just then, but I'll enlighten you now, if only by way of setting you an example in frank speech."

"I'm a detective, here at Rough Robin on important business; so important that I carry papers giving me full authority to arrest any man whom I see fit to take into custody."

"What have I done to be nabbed like this?" growled Baldwin.

"Shot some one at the Scottish Chief," was the instant reply. "I don't know just who you shot, for I was too far off to make that much out, but I have my suspicions. I think you potted Tom Penny. And I'm open to bet slight odds that I can name the man whose money induced you to take that risk off his hands!"

"It's a lie! I've done no harm to anybody!" muttered Baldwin, but with a nervous shiver as his eyes drooped before that keen gaze.

"There's a lie floating 'round between us, I know," laughed Dutch Dan, easily; then straightening up and speaking coldly, hardly he added: "Business is business, Bully Baldwin, and the closer you stick to the plain truth, the more apt you are to cheat the rope and die a natural death. You've got information I'm wanting. Make a clean breast of it, and I swear on honor to turn you loose to escape the hangman if you can! Refuse, and I vow I'll turn back and hand you over to the gang that's hunting you now, to suffer for your last crime!"

Bully Baldwin had shivered as though an icy draught had suddenly swept across his person. He knew that his captor was talking in stern earnest when he uttered that threat. And knowing as he did how surely he would be lynched out of hand if the citizens of Rough Robin were to lay hands on him while in the heat of their indignation, he felt that he had no alternative; he must trust this detective, blindly.

"It's your only chance, you see, Bully," coldly added Dutch Dan, again proving how accurately he could read the face of his captive. "I don't say I'll insure your neck against the crimes you have committed but I do say that if you talk straight, and tell me all you can on the subjects I select, I will unfasten your hands and turn you loose with a chance to cheat the rope."

"You'll give me back my guns, too?" muttered the gambler.

Dutch Dan hesitated for a few moments, during which the assassin fairly held his breath in suspense. Then he said:

"If you don't ask for them too soon: yes, I'll do even that! I reckon you've had enough of shooting to keep your hands clean for a little bit, anyway!"

"And you'll turn me loose with a fair chance to get clear?" still doubting this unexpected good fortune after all had seemed lost. "It isn't a brace game? You'll not face me at a trap, and set me going only to run my neck into a noose before I can fairly say I'm free?"

"Play me white, and I'll never do you dirt, Bully," was the quiet response. "I'm after too big game to bother my head over small trash like you, save as a path to the broad trail. I'll give you a fair start with the rope, and if it catches you up, it will be more your own fault than mine. Will that answer?"

"It must," with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Because if it don't please you, I can set up a hoot that will mighty soon fetch a crowd of hot-heads this way, who—"

"Ask me what you want to know, and I'll talk straight as a string."

"See that you do, then, Bully! I'm not overstocked with patience, and I never give a man the same chance twice running. Now—who was it you shot down there at the Scottish Chief?"

"Tom Penny. I had to do it, or go up a tree, you see," he hurriedly explained as Dutch Dan frowned blackly. "Kavanagh had me foul, and he offered me my choice between earning a neat pile of money or being run up a tree with a placard pinned to my breast. What could I say?"

"Reckon you killed the poor fellow?"

Baldwin hesitated, but only for a breath. He knew now that nothing but the truth could save him, and the truth he was resolved to speak.

"I covered his brain, with a dead rest. I've hit the size of a silver dollar ten times running, further than that, and off-hand."

"Then you killed a man worth a million times more than an army of such rascals as yourself and Lee Kavanagh!" frowned Dutch Dan. "You say Kavanagh hired you to shoot him. Did Keefe Valder have a finger in the pie?"

"Not that I know of. Kavanagh did all the bargaining. He was to give me the proofs he held against me, with a good sum of money. I was to hide near the mine, and he was to draw Tom Penny under my rifle. I was to shoot him, then make a break for my horse, which I had stationed close enough to almost insure my escape."

"And after this was done?" slowly demanded Dutch Dan, his cold gray eyes fixed on the face of the gambler as though reading his inmost thoughts. "You were to tell me everything, bear in mind, Bully!"

"I was to get out of the country as best I could," muttered the gambler, slowly, his eyes drooping before that burning gaze.

"And you never heard anything about a man called Gregor McGregor? Don't answer without thinking, Bully. I'm really anxious to save you from going up a tree—at least for the present!"

"I didn't know you were interested in that fellow."

"You know it now, then. What can you tell me about him? Where is it Lee Kavanagh keeps the old gentleman in limbo?"

"I can't describe the place to you, but—"

"You can point it out, though?"

"If I have to—yes! In fact, I was on my way there when you run me foul," sulkily muttered the prisoner.

"Taking a message to him from Kavanagh, no doubt? Bah!" with a sudden and complete change of tone. "Dare you try to play me dirt, after the warning I have given you, Bully Baldwin? Out with it! What were you going to Gregor McGregor for? What did Lee Kavanagh bid you do to him?"

"That was part of the bargain that demon drove with me," muttered the gambler, now thoroughly cowed. "After I shot Tom Penny, I was to make the den where the old man is in limbo, and shoot or knife him; then I was free-foot, with liberty to go where it pleased me."

"And you meant to do this second murder?"

The gambler shrugged his shoulders.

"It was in the bargain, and what could I do? Kavanagh had me under his thumb, and could pinch me as he saw fit. There was only the one way out—and I had to take it or hang."

"You carry orders to the fellows who guard McGregor, then? Of course Kavanagh would do all he could to smooth the path for you!"

"He said there was no orders needed. He told me he had called in his men, on purpose to leave the coast clear for me. I was to dispose of the old fellow—he told me where I could hide his carcass where it might lay undiscovered till the crack of doom—and then make the best of my way out of the country. He said that with Tom Penny dead, he would have no further use for old McGregor."

CHAPTER XXXV.

YIELDING ONLY TO DEATH.

THE instant Bully Baldwin fired his gold-bought shot, Lee Kavanagh dropped down behind the boulder on which he was sitting, deftly covering his precious person from any shot which might be let off by the enraged mine-defenders.

But they seemed too utterly dazed by the fall of their chief to even think of using their rifles for those first few moments. And most bitterly did the dark-faced schemer curse the curiosity which had drawn so many of Rough Robin's citizens to the spot. One stout rush now would almost surely win the stockade, and—

Then came the exposure of Bully Baldwin as the hired assassin mistook that united yell of angry horror at his base deed for a roar of espial, and three-fourths of the gathering set off in chase, shooting rapidly and making a great deal of noise if they accomplished little else. And after a brief battle with cold reason and hot impulse, Lee Kavanagh diverged from his plans as originally laid out, and gave his remaining allies the signal to make a rush for the stockade!

He was promptly obeyed, but the boldest among the party never gained the base of the pickets. The mine-defenders rallied and set their repeating rifles to working merrily, dropping here and there a stout fellow, writhing in death, or sending another yonder to the nearest cover, limping, groaning or cursing with pain.

This rapid firing attracted the notice of many of those who had set out in chase of Bully Baldwin, and as the attack became plainer, a number of citizens who had favored the side championed by Tom Penny, dropped the chase and turned back with angry cries against the assailants, until it seemed as though there must come a pitched battle outside of the stockades.

Keefe Valder was shouting aloud for peace; for his friends to cease their mad attack; and after a keen look over the field, summing up the chances for and against success if pressed to the end, Lee Kavanagh also lifted his voice in favor of peace.

"Back, gentlemen!" he cried, springing before the doubting assailants, his face white as a corpse, his voice trembling with powerful emotion. "If they have murdered our friends, don't let that abominable outrage induce us to overstep the limits of the law! Our poor friends shall be avenged—I swear it by my hopes of heaven—but avenged legally! Back—if only for my sake, gentlemen!"

There were a few more dropping shots interchanged, but the attack on the stockade was not renewed, and thus the matter ended for the time being.

As night began to deepen, in pairs and little squads those who had gone in pursuit of the disguised assassin came straggling back to town, empty-handed. They had nothing but blank disappointment to report. Not a glimpse of the murderer had been obtained by any of

their number after he vanished across the rocky divide just back of his ambush. And their keenest trailers had utterly failed to pick up his trail.

That was a night of wild excitement in and about Rough Robin.

Word was brought from the Scottish Chief that though Tom Penny was still alive, that was about all. He was shot through the head, and lay unconscious of his surroundings. Recovery was impossible, and his death was only a question of time.

Even while this was being discussed, confirmation came in the shape of Ridge Tanner, who sought a doctor to take back with him.

"They ain't scarcely a fightin' show, but we're bound to do what we kin. An' then—ef wu'st does come—I'm goin' to s'arch out the hell-houn' as shot my boy, ef I hev to rake all hell over to find him."

There was naught of acting in all this, and those who saw and listened, knew that Ridge Tanner had no hopes of saving the life of the master whom he loved so well, even though he carried back the doctor with him to the Scottish Chief.

Opinion seemed to be about equally divided in Rough Robin as to the foul deed. Those who followed Valder & Kavanagh, declared that the shot must have been fired by a personal enemy, winged by an old grudge, since of all who had sighted the murderer, not one had recognized him; and they surely would have done this if the rascal had ever lived at Rough Robin.

On the other side, the friends and well-wishers of Tom Penny, made no bones over charging Lee Kavanagh and his gang with murder.

More than one ugly "racket" grew out of this difference of opinion. More than once that night the streets of Rough Robin were lit up by the red flashing of pistols, and the rock-hills echoed again with the sharp explosions. And for a time it seemed as though the entire community would be drawn into a mad, unreasoning fight to the death.

Lee Kavanagh and Keefe Valder did more toward preventing this than all the others combined. Regardless of their own danger, they mingled with the excited crowds, begging and pleading for peace, declaring that sooner than have more blood shed they would resign their claims to the property in dispute. And thus, little by little, they managed to draw their allies out of the hurly-burly for the time being.

When the new day dawned, there were many anxious faces to be seen in front of the stockade, but not one daring to press across the line of danger as marked out by the defenders. And when Ridge Tanner showed himself over the tall pickets, briefly stating that Tom Penny was still living, though as yet unconscious, that anxiety turned to gloomy regret.

"You want to keep your distance, mind ye," harshly added the veteran, holding up his Winchester and tapping it with grim significance. "Tom Penny swore he'd hold the fort while life lasted. I'm holdin' it fer him now, an' while he draws a breath o' life, I'll hold it ag'inst all who come. When—ef he—"

He could not utter that awful word, and abandoning the attempt, he disappeared from view. But other sturdy men were on guard, and a dozen grim muzzles kept in sight over the pointed pickets.

Both Kavanagh and Keefe Valder played their parts well through those troubled hours. They posted large rewards for the apprehension of the murderer, living or dead. They even offered a handsome sum for any information regarding the assassin, and begged their friends and enemies alike to leave no stone unturned in trying to bring the vile wretch to punishment.

They both took horse and joined in the search through the hills for the assassin, and if they failed to discover the man himself, they found traces which he left behind him; a mass of rags which more than one recognized, lying in a cold, damp, cheerless den which bore evidence of having been occupied for some little time.

"And they swallowed it all—the blessed idiots!" grimly laughed Lee Kavanagh that night as he sat with his partner in the room where he had watched them on more than one occasion. "Now are you satisfied, you creaker?"

"That he's gone; yes! But suppose he's holding him alive, hoping to wring more money from us?"

"Supposing your grandmother married your daughter, what relation would I be to Queen Victoria?" laughed Kavanagh, his lip curling with contempt as he refilled his glass.

Two more days passed by, and then dark tidings came to Rough Robin from the Scottish Chief. Tom Penny was dead; had passed away from life without ever recovering his consciousness after receiving that treacherous shot!

Ridge Tanner brought the news to town, and even before his lips parted to utter the words, the truth was readily surmised. His face was strangely pale and worn. He looked as though he had not closed his eyes in sleep since his loved young master fell before that dastardly shot. And there were not lacking those who, in whispers, predicted that the honest old fellow would not linger long after his master.

"I'm doin' what I think the pore lad would

hev me do," the veteran added, in low, hard tones, as though he had to strain his will and nerves to the utmost to keep them steady. "They's a good many in town that he liked an' 'spected as fri'nds. They's more that he knowed hated him an' wished him bad luck. But I'm askin' the hull town to come an' take one more look at his face afore he's planted; or sech o' the town as keers to take the tramp out to the mine."

His voice choked for a little, but he conquered it, and added:

"The plantin'll be to-morrow, at noon. You're all welcome to come. While my pore lad lays thar, dead, I don't know no inemies; they're all one with his fri'nds!"

Ridge Tanner managed to say this, then turned abruptly away and left the town, hurrying back to the Scottish Chief.

Lee Kavanagh was not long in catching the news, and hastened to have a serious conference with Keefe Valder, during which they strove to map out the best course for them to pursue on the morrow.

"For one, I'm goin' to attend the funeral, and you had better do the same," grimly uttered the dark-faced schemer. "It will look better. And then—I want to make sure it is really Tom Penny they're going to plant!"

That night was the first one since the foul deed that passed without a collision between the rival cliques in Rough Robin. The death of poor Tom Penny seemed to smother for a time all hard feelings between his friends and his enemies, and the two sides mingled amicably as the coming funeral was earnestly discussed.

Long before the hour of noon men began to gather in front of the Scottish Chief workings, but the men on duty along the stockade sternly warned them to keep their distance until invited to come nearer. And it was high noon before Ridge Tanner opened the great gate.

Following him came half a dozen men, bearing a rude coffin between them, which they placed on rude trestles standing a short distance from the stockade, under the shade of a bushy-topped tree. And then Ridge Tanner spoke quietly:

"The gents will please form in line an' advance and view the lad. I don't reckon it's needful for me to ax ye to show yourselves white, but ef any warnin' is needed, I tote it mighty handy to the hand o' me! An' I'm feelin' as ef it'd do me head good to hev a fa'r excuse fer fetchin' it into play, too!"

With remarkable nerve, Lee Kavanagh took the lead, pausing beside the rude coffin and keenly, gravely scrutinizing the face of his enemy, and he even touched the white brow with a finger before passing on.

"A low, dangerous growl came from the lips of Ridge Tanner, but Lee Kavanagh boldly met his fiery gaze, quietly uttering:

"To prove to you that I had naught to do with the foul murder! If I had, his blood would begin to flow afresh!"

It was a deft stroke of policy, and Kavanagh felt as much when, passing on, he caught the low murmur that ran through the crowd. He knew he had gained many friends by that audacious action.

When the procession had passed by the coffin, Ridge Tanner made a sign which was immediately answered by two of his men covering over the coffin, fastening down the rough lid. And while they were thus engaged, the old miner spoke coldly, distinctly:

"I thank you, gents, fer honorin' of my poor lad like this. I don't ax if you are his fri'nds or his inemies, fer that don't count while his murdered body is above ground. After—but fu'st, a word to you, Lee Kavanagh an' Keefe Valder."

"You say you've got the papers to prove you're buyin' the mine. It ain't fer me to dispute that, or to doubt whether you come by 'em honestly; that goes beyond my duty. I was ready to fight you all, as long as my master was livin' to bid me do it. Ef he was alive, you wouldn't be here now. But he's dead, an' that lets me out. You kin take possession of all, jest as quick as pleases ye, gents!"

"Now fer what I was goin' to say. The only man I loved on aithr lays here, dead, murdered by a cowardly cur! The time's come when I've got to plant the pore lad. Then—I'm goin' to take the trail o' the hellhound as murdered him, an' die on the track ef I can't ketch him afore! You kin mark that down, gents. It's sworn to, double over!"

A gesture, and his fellows surrounded the coffin, lifting it and bearing it slowly away to the spot selected for burial on the hillside.

And thus Valder & Kavanagh gained possession of the Scottish Chief.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LEE KAVANAGH WANTS THE EARTH.

"AND now, pard, I reckon it's about time you and I were coming to a thorough understanding," said Lee Kavanagh, on the evening following the final scene at the Scottish Chief.

Once more the partners were sitting with the table between them, drinking and smoking together. Keefe Valder was looking worn and anxious, like one far from being at ease in his

mind; but the younger partner was flushed and triumphant. Why should he not be?

Their desperate game had been played to a successful end. The coveted bonanza was in their possession, held by a strong force of armed men, who had orders to shoot down any and all who might try to gain admission without having possession of the password given his men by Kavanagh himself.

Gregor McGregor had vanished from sight; Tom Penny was dead. Even Ridge Tanner was gone to search for the murderer of his beloved master, and his men had scattered, without a head or guiding spirit.

And, above all, he felt that he was master of all else. He knew that his ascendancy over Keefe Valder was so complete that let him demand what he might, that worthy would not dare oppose him, even in mind.

"Don't we understand each other, Lee?" mumbled Valder, trying to force a smile, but with a woeful lack of success.

"I'm not so sure of that, my dear fellow," smiled Kavanagh, a smile that seemed more a threat than an expression of cordiality and friendship. "Anyway, it can do no hurt to remind you that, as yet, you've done precious little toward turning the divine Alcina's thoughts to love and wedlock."

Valder shivered. Whatever his failings, and they were legion, he loved Alcina, and wished to see her at peace, it not happy; that, he felt, would be too much to ask, so soon after the death of her lover.

"It is so soon. She has heard of Tom—of his death. That cursed Dutch witch took pains to tell her all about it! I'll kick her out of the house before another day!" with vicious anger flashing in his eyes and bringing the hot color to his face again.

"Not much you won't, old fellow," curtly interposed Kavanagh. "She's a jewel beyond price, is Gretchen, and kicking her out will prove quite as dangerous work as trying to serve me after that fashion would. Why, I count more on her for bringing Ally around than I do even on you."

Keefe Valder made no reply; he dared not. Tighter and tighter Lee Kavanagh was drawing his bonds, until he felt more like a slave than a free man, even this early after the victory was won!

"As for giving her time to brood over the happy release of Tom Penny, that is just what I've got too much sense to even think of doing. She needs waking up, and I can't think of a better method than this—to give her a husband."

"And you, my dear fellow, will be all the safer when once you have won the right to call me son-in-law. I know you're far from being over head and ears in love with yours truly. I know that if you thought you could bring it about without hitching a tight noose around your own precious neck, you would send me down to visit Satan with a glorious good-will!"

"You have no right to charge me with that, Kavanagh!"

"I think I have, but we'll not dispute over that point, especially as you'll never get the chance to try it on," laughed the dark-faced villain, sipping at his whisky daintily before resuming: "You don't love me for a cent, but I'm terribly fond of you, dear fellow! So fond that I would rather see you dead and buried than to have you make a cruel blunder, such as you've been turning over in your mind!"

"To get down to sober business, Valder, I'm bound to have my will in this matter, if I have to crush you to the earth! Even now I can do that without spilling a single drop of mire on my own garments! From the very first I have played my cards so as to keep a death-grip on your throat. I hold that grasp now and it rests with you whether I unclothe my fingers, or send you down to ruin and a rope! Take your choice, Keefe Valder!"

"What must I do?" muttered the miserable wretch, huskily.

"First, brace up and be as much like a man as your cowardly nature will allow. Next, go bring Ally here to me. Last, and most important of all, see that you back me up in all I ask of the little darling!"

With a low groan Keefe Valder rose from his seat, and with slow gait left the room.

He was not long absent, and when he returned, Alcina Valder followed after, partially supported by the strong arm of Gretchen Stauffer, looking bright and saucy as ever, no doubt feeling the same, to judge by the sly wink with which she favored Lee Kavanagh as she fell a little behind her young mistress.

"You wished to see me, I believe, Mr. Kavanagh?" asked Alcina, leaning lightly on the back of a chair as she gazed steadily into the face of the villain who rose with a polite bow at her entrance.

This was the first time he had seen the maiden since the afternoon when Tom Penny visited the house last, and he was struck by her extraordinary pallor. He could almost believe she had enameled her face, so strangely white did it appear in that dim light.

Apart from this extreme paleness, Alcina looked fairly well. Her voice was firm and steady, clear and composed, vastly different

from what he had expected, knowing as he did that she had learned all about the death and burial of her lover.

Somehow that unexpected calmness and strength made him more brutal than he had intended showing himself on the surface, and he said:

"I did send for you, to say that your father and I have decided that further waiting would be worse than useless; that you and I may as well be wedded now as a week or a month since!"

"I have refused your hand once; what reason have I given you for thinking my answer now will be different?" coldly asked the maiden.

"I declined to accept no as an answer then; I will decline now if you are foolish enough to insist upon standing in your own light—or in your father's light, which ought to be still more important to a true and loving daughter! You will marry me, and at once, or he shall be the sufferer! If you doubt my truth, ask him for yourself, my dear."

There was no need. Keefe Valder, despite the strong liquor he had swallowed, hung his head, the picture of despondency and fear. No words he might utter could speak more eloquently than his attitude.

"Und von mans is pig heab petter as no mans!" murmured Gretchen.

Alcina smiled, coldly, strangely, as she made reply:

"You are a bold man, Lee Kavanagh, to run such risk! Knowing how much cause I have for hating you—knowing that my lover is a corpse through your machinations—you still ask me to marry you!"

"I am innocent of Tom Penny's death," was the cold response. "I will prove this to you in good time, but it matters not now. You will prepare to marry me at once—or no later than the last of the week, at the outside—or your father will—shall I finish?"

Alcina turned to Keefe Valder, catching his hands in hers, gazing intently into his haggard face as she murmured:

"Father, is it true? Will my marrying that demon save you from harm? Tell me true, if you ever loved your child!"

Lee Kavanagh held up one menacing hand, and Keefe Valder saw it.

"It is true, my poor child!" he muttered, unsteadily.

Alcina dropped his hands and turned once more to Lee Kavanagh.

"You will accept no less sacrifice, miserable wretch?" she asked, cold scorn mingling with the anger that flashed in her blue eyes.

"I will take no less than you as a wife, Ally," was the deliberate response. "I've played my cards for that from the very first deal. I'll soon win you over to a better and sweeter state of mind, once you are all my own; never fear for that, little woman!"

"If time is granted you, better add," with icy coldness, all trace of agitation and anger vanishing. "I will marry you, since nothing less will satisfy your greed. After—who knows? It may be your blood that will stain my hand—or it may be my own!"

"Both of which I'll guard against, my dear," laughed Lee Kavanagh, lightly rising to his feet and stepping forward, only to see Alcina move away with:

"In two days, then, I will be ready to marry you—if alive!"

"I wish me it vhas only von tay! Den I haf dime vor bicking me a mans oudt vor myselluf!" laughed Gretchen, accompanying Alcina from the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GHOSTS AT THE WEDDING.

THE room was brilliantly illumined, and though there was little alteration in the apartment otherwise, the people gathered therein wore something of a bridal air.

Keefe Valder was dressed in his best, and few who saw him then ever doubted that this was one of the most delightful events time and change could have brought about; he was so gay, so talkative, so hospitably bent on making every one present enjoy themselves.

"It's not every day a man celebrates the wedding of his daughter, you see," he would laugh after his bland, suave fashion which had, somehow, deserted him of late days.

And Lee Kavanagh was even more feverishly gay, if possible, greatly changed from his usual cold, cynical, mocking nature, though that was hardly to be marveled at, considering that in less than another hour he would be joined in matrimony to the purest, sweetest, loveliest lady in all Rough Robin!

It had come to that. The scant grace asked for by Alcina Valder had been exhausted. The evening of the second day had come, and now it only remained for the sacrifice to be completed.

The important moment had arrived at last! Keefe Valder had whispered to the minister and to the bridegroom, then passed out of the room, and up to the door of his child's chamber.

The few invited guests—just enough to serve as witnesses, as Valder had laughingly explained

to them—curiously watched the door as the sound of footsteps were heard, and more than one of them caught his breath with a little gasp as a marvelously lovely vision glided into the room, leaning lightly on the arm of Keefe Valder.

Behind them came Gretchen Stauffer, smiling brightly, a slight nod of triumph shaking her white-capped head as she caught the eyes of Lee Kavanagh—as much as to remind him of the pledge she had given.

Truly, she had kept her word! Never was there a more beautiful bride than this! And as he felt thus, Lee Kavanagh could scarcely conceal his mad exultation. No one would ever dare whisper that his was an unwilling bride, after this.

Alcina looked smilingly into his darkly handsome face as he stepped forward to take her arm, and in place of dreading the ordeal, she actually seemed eager for it to begin.

The man of God rose and stepped forward, opening his book, clearing his throat to utter his customary prefatory remarks, when—

"I dinks ve pedder vaidt a leedle, ain't it?" cried Gretchen Stauffer, thrusting a cocked revolver fairly into the face of Keefe Valder.

"And so do I, Lee Kavanagh!" cried the bride, freeing her arm and springing back a pace, with the same movement bringing a gleaming pistol to a level with the astounded bridegroom's eyes. "One step forward and I kill you, murderer, assassin, liar and perjurer!"

And behind them the door swung silently open, to admit a number of armed men, whose strong hands closed upon the astounded pair before they could lift a finger to defend themselves.

"Keep your places, gentlemen!" cried Alcina, sweeping her weapon around toward the amazed guests who were there by special invitation from Keefe Valder.

"Yaw, dot vhas so, shendlemans!" echoed Gretchen, laughing merrily, but with a warning devil in those big blue eyes as she leveled her revolver across her plump left forearm. "Pedder you makes no droobles py dis vedding bardy, uff you don't vhas hoongry vor dose bowder to schmell mighty loudt! Dot vhas me you hear go make moosic py my bazoo!"

It was all done so smoothly, so suddenly! Both Keefe Valder and Lee Kavanagh were ironed, with hands twisted behind their backs, before they could stir a muscle by way of defending themselves. And now, with firm grips on each shoulder, two men guarded each prisoner, their free hands holding ready pistols for use in case of an attempted rescue.

"We don't want any trouble, gentlemen," coldly uttered one of the captors, a tall, stern-faced man of middle age. "We are acting on good authority, and can show it when the proper time comes."

"Satan roast you by inches!" gasped Kavanagh, his blazing eyes fixed on the laughing face of Gretchen Stauffer. "You're at the bottom of all this! Who set you up to it?"

"Dot galf vhas got too blendy rope, I dinks me, shendlemans!" cried Gretchen, with a sudden frown. "Pedder you glabs a slobber py dot hole in his vace for a leedle, maype—not?"

Both Kavanagh and Valder broke into a desperate struggle for freedom, but the odds were too great, their disadvantage too heavy. They were cast to the floor and speedily gagged, then lifted upright and placed in chairs, guarded by armed men.

While this was being done, Alcina Valder put away her weapon, and with one hand gently touching the minister's arm, whispered a few sentences in his ear. Astonished, bewildered, seemingly incapable of making reply, the worthy man of God slowly followed the maiden as she led the way from the room.

The tall, stern-faced man who appeared to be chief of those making this double arrest, muttered a few words to his men. They picked up their prisoners, chairs and all, moving them back until against the wall directly opposite the door leading into the hall. Then—

The door opened, and pale, stern, a man entered to stand with folded arms before the two helpless criminals. Wild-eyed they stared at this apparition, for such it seemed to them then. And with a choking gurgle in his throat, Keefe Valder fainted away!

Again the door opened, this time to admit a couple, arm in arm. One brightly smiling, flushed with love and unspeakable happiness. The other pale, weak, his head bandaged, but proudly smiling, his brown eyes lit up with curiously mingled love and triumph as they rested on the dark face of Lee Kavanagh, now fairly convulsed with baffled hatred and fear.

For he began to realize how completely he had been duped, how utterly he was defeated, even when he felt that his triumph was at its height! How it had all come about, he was too thoroughly bewildered to comprehend, just then, but he knew this: Gregor McGregor stood before him, alive and well! And Tom Penny, whom he had gazed upon dead and coffined, whom he had seen buried deep in the ground, was come to life again!

It was all like a horrible nightmare dream to the baffled schemer, and he sat as though turned to stone through all that followed, only his rolling eyeballs and his spasmodically heaving chest betraying life.

The white-haired minister of the gospel returned to the room, and the young couple stood up before him, listening reverently to his slow, earnest talk.

Behind them stood Gretchen Stauffer, with a tall form by her side. This was the man who seemed to take the lead in the double arrest, and dazed, stupefied though his brain was then, Lee Kavanagh dimly fancied there was something in his grave, stern face that recalled Dutch Dan the "Pilgrim from Spitzenberg."

The ceremony was not a long one, and followed no set forms. The man of God belonged to the Methodist church, and used his own language instead of that set down in cold type.

Sweetly, yet clearly, Alcina responded when questioned. Frankly, joyously, yet reverently, Tom Penny made his responses. And if his wound weakened his voice, it was distinct enough to ring through that room and fall with terrible force on the strained hearing of Lee Kavanagh. And then the solemn words were spoken; love had triumphed over all; and without losing his honor, Tom Penny had won his wife!

"Oh! holdt me dight, somepody!" cried Gretchen Stauffer, in ecstasy.

And with a wild scream, she began to turn somersets then and there, revolving like an animated pin-wheel!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE PILGRIMAGE IS OVER.

"GRETCHEN—Gretchen! vor shame py dysel-luf! Vhas dis a circus show dot you makes a durn-offer sbectagle uff yourselluf like dose?" cried the voice of Dutch Dan—but it was the tall detective who uttered the words!

"Augh! give us a let-up on the Dutch racket, Downy Dan!" cried Gretchen, pausing right-end upward, striking an attitude as she pulled off her lace cap, following it with a blonde wig, revealing a close crop of brown curls. "Gretchen Stauffer flies out the window, and Jolly Queen comes meekly in at the door! Yours to command, lady and gentlemen!"

A sharp cry from one of the men who held Lee Kavanagh attracted attention, and with a swift stride "Dutch Dan" reached the prisoner's side, bending and peering into his face for a moment, then turning with a quick gesture to Tom Penny as he said:

"Please remove your wife, Mr. Penny. I will explain, later!"

There was no need of explanation, however, for as the startled couple glanced at Lee Kavanagh, they knew they were looking at the face of a dead man!

"I'm not doctor enough to explain just *how*, but it's not so hard to tell *why* Lee Kavanagh died," the tall detective, who introduced himself as Daniel Downey, was saying. "He had staked everything on this little game of his. He saw that he had lost, even when feeling most certain all was won. And that's what killed him!"

The room had been cleared. The corpse was taken away. Keefe Valder was in an up-stairs chamber, under close guard. Tom Penny, still pale from his wound, lay back in an easy-chair, with his wife at his feet, on a stool, her hands clasping his tenderly.

Her face had lost much of its color, but it showed far more of happiness than of sorrow or grief.

Beyond them, lazily lying on a couch, was a slender, lithe young fellow, no longer Gretchen Stauffer, but a rosy-cheeked, smooth-faced young man, seemingly well content to permit his partner, "Dutch Dan" no longer to explain the mystery which still hung over this curious affair.

"It was just as well, for it saves us no little bother," added the detective. "Though I don't doubt we could have raked up enough to bring Lee Kavanagh to the gallows, it happens that he has done nothing in this little affair to fairly entitle him to hanging; and anything less than that would hardly satisfy Rough Robin, now the truth is out."

"And father—I mean Keefe Valder?" murmured Alcina, unsteadily.

"It is as I told you, Mrs. Penny," was the quick response. "Keefe Valder is not your father. Not a drop of your blood flows in his veins. He stole you from your parents, through motives of revenge, when you was but a child—hardly more than a baby, in fact!"

"Yet he has treated me as a daughter! He has been very kind to me through all these years, until—"

"Until he tried to force you into wedding Kavanagh!" frowned Tom Penny, bending forward and kissing her on the white brow.

"Still, I could wish he might be spared, if only—"

"That is impossible, madam," coldly inter-

posed the detective. "We have hunted him down and arrested him on a capital charge. He must go back with us to stand his trial for murder!"

That explanation consumed hours before everything was made clear to those who had played parts in the drama we have been slowly unfolding, and a lack of space will not admit of a verbatim report. Besides, that is not necessary, after what has been placed before the reader.

Years before the date of this story, Keefe Valder as we have known him—Fenn Garner, as Daniel Downey now named him—stole Alcina from her parents, through motives of revenge. He shortly afterward committed murder, and fled for life, bearing the child with him, no doubt thinking to use her as a means of extorting money, or, it may be, as a means of torturing his hated enemies.

Since then, though her parents died, Alice Neale, the real name of the one we have known as Alcina Valder, fell heiress to a goodly fortune through the demise of a distant relative across the ocean. And in searching for her, or the heirs, rather, Daniel Downey fancied he had combined the trail with one still more important in his eyes; for in the long ago he had been engaged in trying to bring the murderer, Fenn Garner, to justice.

Time had greatly altered Fenn Garner, and a secret trip to Rough Robin failed, so far as positively identifying Keefe Valder. And in hopes of getting at the truth, Downey thought of running in his young partner, Jolly Queen, as a spy under the roof of the man whom he believed to be his game.

How this succeeded, the reader already knows.

Bully Baldwin proved as good as his word, and led "Dutch Dan" to the cave where Gregor McGregor lay bound and helpless, deserted by his guards in order that as few as possible might certainly learn of his terrible end, as plotted by Lee Kavanagh. The mine-owner was set free, and with his weapons restored, Bully Baldwin fled for dear life.

That same night Daniel Downey conducted Gregor McGregor to the Scottish Chief, introducing him and revealing his own identity, with a portion of his business in that quarter. They found Tom Penny alive and conscious, though it had been a marvelously narrow escape from instant death, Baldwin's bullet having entered his scalp at one temple, glancing under the skin and emerging almost directly opposite, but without fracturing the skull!

Then and there the detective devised the plot that was afterward carried out to complete success. Under his watchful eye the doctor was directed to prepare Tom Penny for the dread part he had to play in order to throw their enemies wholly off their guard; and right nobly the physician performed the part assigned him, as we have seen.

His potion worked perfectly. To all appearance—even to the touch—Tom Penny seemed a corpse. And as a corpse he was actually buried on the hillside; to be resurrected that same night!

Through "Gretchen Stauffer" Alcina Valder was told the truth, and carefully tutored for the part she was to play. This was all the more easy, since she was early informed of Gretchen's identity, and assured that all should go well with her and her lover.

Jealous lest their captive be taken from them and lynched by the citizens of Rough Robin when the strange story was fairly spread over town, the two detectives stole away under cover of darkness with Fenn Garner in irons and gagged, lying low among the hills until the stage came rolling by, when they boarded it and went on their way. To dispose of the case in a word, they succeeded in taking their prisoner back to the theater of his crimes, where he was, in due time, convicted, sentenced, and hung for murder.

Gregor McGregor, undaunted by his past trials, set a double force of men at work on the Scottish Chief, and to this day it is a richly-productive mine. He has another manager, now, though he tried hard to induce Tom Penny to remain as such, or even as a partner, but in vain.

Mrs. Penny would not hear to it, and of course Tom yielded to her wishes. They journeyed East, and without much trouble obtained possession of the fortune left Alice Neale.

English Sparrow, Dave Flint, Teddy Malone, Tim Mahar, Jim Rich, Billy McShane, with a number of others who had acted as Lee Kavanagh's "heelers," were emphatically if not politely told by the reputable citizens of Rough Robin that the good of their health demanded a bit of traveling. And with a stern warning to never return, they traveled.

Bully Baldwin was shot over the gaming-table, less than six months after he fled from Rough Robin.

As for "Downy Dan" and his young partner, Jolly Queen, they are still in harness, and have made more than one good record since the days of which this chronicle treats.

THE END.

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